

Women of the Storm: A Balance of Powers

Emma Rosenthal
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA



Abstract: Women of the Storm (WOS) was formed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina with the goal of engaging local female activists in attracting Congressional attention to the region. The organization, although successful in garnering support for Hurricane recovery, wetland protection, and preventative measures in case of another storm, suffered because of the continued impact of a long history of segregation in women’s activism in New Orleans. The split in past organizational affiliations led to the eventual divide of the group along racial lines. This case explores the historical context under which the organization was challenged, as well as WOS’s leadership, recruitment, trip to Washington, and the ultimate exit of minority members. What could WOS have changed to keep these members? How did the organization fail to integrate all New Orleanians into their civil activism? Women of the Storm serves as an exemplar for women’s response in the wake of a natural disaster, but underscores a cautionary tale of member inclusion and the necessity of diversity as a priority in organizational structure.

The Storm and Its Aftermath

Blue tarps covered the damage that killed nearly 2,000 people. Houses were scarred with Search and Rescue symbols, noting the absence of life. Abandoned warehouses lay empty and corpses covered the city. Hundreds of miles of neighborhoods were submerged, including the entirety of the Lower Ninth Ward, the heaviest hit area, which was 98.3% African American at the time of the storm (Data Center 2018). New Orleans stood in the wake of the deadliest natural disaster in modern American history. As the country recovered from shock and grief, Hurricane Katrina exposed a pattern of environmental degradation and government negligence experienced by minority communities in New Orleans.

Louisiana has maintained a pattern of environmental racism long before Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent BP oil spill. The state’s cluster of industrial plants, dubbed “Cancer Alley” in 1987, has exacerbated and created a variety of health problems, leading Louisiana to be the state with the second-highest cancer death rate in the United States (McQuaid 2000). This statistic has both a racial and socioeconomic component. Louisiana is the third poorest state in the country, with 20.2% of the population living below the poverty line (Talk Poverty 2017). The level of poverty is even greater in Baton Rouge (at 25%), where Exxon’s Standard Heights plant is located (Pastor 2006). According to the renowned father of environmental justice, Robert Bullard, even African Americans of somewhat higher socioeconomic status are more likely to live in highly polluted communities than white families of low socioeconomic status who make only \$10,000 a year (Featherstone 2005). The impoverishment of African-American communities remains heavily concentrated below the Mason-Dixon Line, aligning with the Jim Crow segregation of half a century ago. Anne Rolfes, founder of an environmental advocacy

group called the Louisiana Bucket Brigade stated, “The contrast is unbelievable. You have in one neighborhood 40% child poverty and Exxon right across the street pulling in \$40 billion” (Lee 2017).

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respects to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2018). Fair treatment includes that no racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group should bear “a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations” (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2018). New Orleans, at the time of Katrina and before, showed clear violations of these principles.

President Clinton’s Executive Order 12898 of 1994 demanded “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations” (Sze 2006). Following the order, studies warned of dangerous levels of toxic pollution in the air and water from Louisianan facilities and emphasized the negative health effects endangering surrounding communities. Nitrogen dioxide, an airborne pollutant from petroleum refining and car exhaust, was included in EPA reports following the order. The compound is linked to asthma, heart attacks, low birth weight, and other symptoms. Researchers found that minorities were, on average, exposed to 38% higher levels of nitrogen dioxide than their counterparts in white neighborhoods. This disparity equates to 7,000 deaths from heart disease per year nationally for minority individuals (Henkel, Dovidio, Gaertner 2006). Further, 40-60% of the damage to Louisiana’s wetland is estimated to come from the oil and gas industry, which may have extended Katrina’s reach (Henkel, Dovidio, Gaertner 2006). Environmentalists believe that much of Hurricane Katrina’s destruction was due not only to mismanagement of the city’s levee system, but also from the depletion of natural barriers along the coast (Women of the Storm 2016). Communities formed groups to address environmental issues that the EPA ignored or dismissed. One of these organizations, Women of the Storm, focused on attracting Congressional support to the region following Katrina.

In 2005, Women of the Storm (WOS) was founded by Anne Milling and a group of 11 other women. The organization was based on the premise that the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita could not be fully understood without seeing the damage first-hand. The women believed that new policies would not be passed or implemented unless politicians could connect with the personal stories the policies would help. The theory underlying the group’s mission was that with more politicians visiting, more votes to protect environmental conditions in the Gulf Coast would be garnered. The non-profit continued to grow, including 130 women by January 30, 2006, the group’s first trip to Washington D.C (Women of the Storm 2016). During these meetings, the WOS members invited politicians of the House and Senate to visit New Orleans in order to gain first-hand exposure of the issues to consider when making environmental policy decisions. Following the first Congressional visit, a few members of the organization broke away to work on more local, community-based issues. A number of structural components exacerbated this division. As the organization grew and developed, fundraising events became less financially accessible for all members of the group. The trips to Washington D.C. were also burdensome for many of the women in terms of both time and money. Many of the women of color, including Sharon Alexis, Kim Dung Nguyen, and Beverly Wright, felt as though the pressing work was on the ground, in their communities. They believed that, while Congressional work was important, Women of the Storm was not balancing that commitment with their responsibilities to respond to

the immediate damage to the city (David 2017). The subconscious exclusion of minority members from Women of the Storm was not unprecedented, but ingrained in a history of segregation within Louisiana feminist movements.

Early Feminist Movements in Louisiana

Feminist movements in Louisiana emerged when the 19th amendment granted women the right to vote. In 1920, the National American Woman Suffrage Association transformed into the League of Women Voters (LWV). In Louisiana, the LWV was a significant catalyst in producing engaged white civic activists (Allured 2016). Its mission was to educate women about exercising their new right to vote by registering new voters and endorsing various reforms. LWV chapter president Evelyn Cloutman remembered, “God did not favor men over women, but the state of Louisiana did” (Allured 2016, 29). Still, this did not translate to membership for non-white groups. Under Jim Crow Laws, the League remained segregated until the mid 1960s.

As it was illegal at that time for black and white people to meet as equals or eat together, planning legitimate meetings under the law became nearly impossible. LWV’s weak attempts at integrating in the 1950s were blocked by the state and black women were discouraged by the delay in integrated meetings. Women of color formed organizations parallel to the LWV, including the Metropolitan Women’s Voters League (MWVL), which served black communities exclusively (Allured 2016). The Louisiana League of Good Government was started in 1963 by African American teachers, including Sybil Haydel Morial, and focused on educating black neighborhoods on voting rights through workshops. This was especially important for minority groups because the state was setting up citizenship tests to “thwart black voting rights” (Allured 2016, 34). Hayden originated from a family of well-educated professionals—her mother was a teacher, her father a surgeon—and had “advantages over many other African Americans in Louisiana... Well-educated, heterosexual, married, and the mother of several baby-boom children, Sybil Morial exhibited characteristics typical of the white-gloved feminists of this older generation in Louisiana” (Allured 2016, 33). Morial’s background allowed her experiences that others in her community could only dream of and she felt a responsibility to use her status accordingly. It was for this reason that she felt her primary commitment was to the African American community and not the community of women at large.

Similar to the LWV, the Young Women’s Christian Association’s (YWCA) interracial efforts ended with segregated branches of the YWCAs, all under the supervision of white women. This angered minority communities, so white women attempted to maneuver the Jim Crow Laws that outlawed any meetings that included food or took place on the YWCAs facilities by creating Living Room Dialogues between black and white women in their private homes. For some, it was the first time they “came into contact with the personal feelings of young black people about segregation” (Allured 2016, 41). Still, black women were tired of waiting for integration and formed their own Young Women’s Christian Organization (YWCO) instead of continuing the unofficial and informally integrated meetings.

These Divisions were also prevalent in education.

Financial necessity prevented most black women from achieving a higher education. The young black women who attended historically black colleges and universities in the state—Xavier, Dillard, Grambling, SUBR, and SUNO—to attain degrees that afforded them professional stature represented a tiny faction of the population (Allured 2016, 47).

Important white women from the LWV and other organizations graduated from Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. In contrast, Southern University, a historically black public counterpart of LSU, remained on the outskirts of Baton Rouge. LSU was thus a “geophysical reminder of the second-class citizenship of African Americans living in a white-ruled society” (Allured 2016, 28). The *Louisiana Women* report reflected the biases of white women in the 1960s South—disparities in pay, income, and education between white and black women, urban and rural were clear, but no racial analysis or specific programs to alleviate suffering were promoted (Allured 2016).

In the original King-Hayden memo, two white female activists, Casey Hayden and Mary King, hoped to unite black and white women after the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (a majority black group) was not seated at the 1964 Democratic Convention (Allured 2016). Most black women responded with “indifference or antagonism” because “they had bigger fish to fry and continued organizing their communities” (Allured 2016, 99). The second memo, *Sex and Caste*, tried to create a women’s network to address women’s issues and overcome divisions within feminist movements and beyond. While it was praised as the “opening salvo of the feminist movement of the 1960s” (Allured 2016, 100) by white women, it was largely ignored by black women (Hayden and King 1965). Part of this is explained by differences between the women themselves. Black women were often the primary breadwinners in their homes and were simultaneously raising large families. White women involved in civic activism, especially in the 1970s, had few or no children, viewing them as a burden that would interrupt their careers and make it difficult or impossible to make their own political contributions. Moreover, it was not until 1971 that Dorothy Mae Taylor became the first African-American woman to serve in the Louisiana House of Representatives thirteen years after the first white woman was elected (Tyler 2013). Taylor noted that:

Women and minorities brought a unique perspective to political leadership, and black women were particularly needed in the legislature because they brought both perspectives. Like so many black women leaders, Taylor considered the people of her community her top priority, regardless of their gender (Allured 2016, 78).

While black women often focused on the injustices against their black communities, white women focused on the sex discrimination that they faced personally.

This does not mean that there weren’t examples of interracial feminist movements in Louisiana. *Save Our Schools* was a mix of women who opposed continued segregation and the city’s attempt to close public schools. In 1970, New Orleans celebrated an integrated International Women’s Day at one of the local YWCAs (Allured 2016). Louisiana women, both white and black, primarily came together for issues of gender and economic justice that affected both groups. Although in such instances there was integration in the feminist fight against injustice, the majority of civic activist groups remained segregated. Even today, organizations including the Junior League and The Links are primarily white and black respectively. The Jim Crow Laws set a precedent for separate civic activity and the formation of segregated groups at that time, like environmental insecurity, have lasted and deeply impacted the recovery response after Katrina (Allured 2016).

Environmental Conditions

Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," a corridor of 125 oil and chemical plants between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, is made up of predominantly rural African-American communities. Pesticides, metals, and other toxic chemicals are prevalent throughout the region, creating public health concerns regarding the air, land, and water. Before Hurricane Katrina, the residents of this area were already demanding action to protect their health and environment, the chemical companies were misreporting data, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was overlooking major incidents of industry corruption (Johnson 2007). Hurricane Katrina exacerbated an already lethal environment and was a catalyst to minority communities demanding immediate action.

Hurricane Katrina struck the New Orleans area on August 29, 2005, and is widely considered the worst hurricane in recent United States history. Post-Katrina New Orleans had a number of concerns to take into consideration when rebuilding. Eighty percent of New Orleans lay under water. Toxic substances from the nearby chemical plants were washed into the floodwaters, causing widespread chronic health problems, nervous system damage, and cancer (Farrant 2010). Local cleanup crews without proper safety equipment and protective clothing were exposed to dangerous toxins when evacuating houses. Katrina left behind over 22 million tons of debris. Among this carnage, 140,000-160,000 homes were to be demolished and disposed of, which included over one million "white goods" (refrigerators, stoves, freezers, etc.) that needed to be handled carefully so as not to leak other toxins into the environment. Three hundred fifty thousand automobiles were drained of oil and gas before being recycled and 300,000 underground fuel tanks and 42,000 tons of hazardous waste needed to be collected and properly disposed of (Pastor 2006). Even the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers, which were utilized as temporary housing for evacuees and victims, had high levels of formaldehyde, which can cause cancer. The largest health issue following Katrina was an inability of evacuees to manage chronic diseases, such as accessing hemodialysis, seizure prophylaxis, medications for diabetes and heart diseases, and HIV and tuberculosis treatment. The pollution in the region reached levels so inconceivably high that the "Katrina cough," an upper respiratory irritation from the mold and dust circulating from the flooding, became a common-name disease (Johnson 2007, 22). Katrina laid a myriad of destruction in its wake.

This destruction, although indiscriminate, damaged minority communities significantly more than white communities. Poor, often predominantly African American neighborhoods were on lower and cheaper land that was particularly vulnerable to flooding. Thus, segregated housing placed such communities in a position to be disproportionately affected by the storm. One example, the Agriculture Street Landfill of New Orleans, is a former dumpsite for both residential and industrial waste that closed in the 1960s. At the time of Hurricane Katrina, it was home to members of a predominantly African American community that had been battling in court for a request to relocate since 1999 due to pesticide, metal, and toxic chemical exposure (Allen 2008). The neighborhood's breast cancer rate is the highest in the state and following Hurricane Katrina's release of toxins into the air and water supplies, much of the debris from the disaster was deposited on this site (Featherstone 2005). This minority neighborhood is not unique in incurring disproportionate damage compared to white neighborhoods following the storm.

Since Katrina, African Americans have reported higher rates of unemployment, psychological distress, and general life disruption than their white counterparts (Pastor 2006). Such disproportionate impact is exacerbated by pre-hurricane policies that put racial and class injustices into place and caused unjust treatment of victims during the hurricane and its

aftermath. The city's negligence in failing to repair the levees, despite community concerns, and maintaining evacuation policies that relied on private means of transportation contributed to fewer African Americans having an evacuation plan and fewer evacuating when the storm hit. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin is blamed for ordering an evacuation of the city less than 24 hours before Katrina's landfall, resulting in the deaths of hundreds who did not have access to transportation. Amtrak transported equipment out of the city before the storm hit and offered spots for several hundred evacuees on their trains (Robillard 2012). Officials declined the offer and the trains left with no passengers.

Throughout the recovery effort, the government was blamed for "bureaucratic failures", including slow transportation of resources to the Superdome, which hosted over 25,000 residents, and the denial of small business loans to applicants from the most damaged areas (Williams 2005). Hundreds of firefighters from surrounding cities offered their help, but were diverted to Atlanta by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and sat through two days of sexual harassment presentations before being sent to New Orleans. Two hundred members of the National Guard in New Mexico offered to help, but Washington did not authorize their deployment until five days after the levees broke (Robillard 2012). Both the state and federal government are criticized for the lack of preventative evacuation measures and inaction in recovery following the storm. This lack of trust in the government among other factors has contributed to one in three black residents not returning to New Orleans after Katrina (Rivlin 2016).

The response of victims in the aftermath was influenced by racial and socioeconomic status. Historically, in disaster situations, minorities and the poor have had greater difficulties recovering due to having less insurance, lower incomes, fewer savings, more unemployment, less access to communication channels and information, and the intensification of existing poverty (Henkel, Dovidio, Gaertner 2006). Post-Katrina recovery was no exception to this pattern of exclusionary relief.

Publicly, New Orleans politicians were vocal about their planned relief strategies. Jimmy Reiss, then head of the Business Council, acknowledged that New Orleans would rebuild in "a completely different way: demographically, geographically, and politically" (Rivlin 2016). Congressman Barney Frank agreed, describing Reiss' strategy as "ethnic cleansing through inaction" (Rivlin 2016). After the Hurricane, President George W. Bush recognized that "poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America" and that the government has a "duty to confront this poverty with bold action," yet only weeks before the storm, the Bush administration changed the focus of the EPA's environmental justice program by "deemphasizing minority and low-income populations and emphasizing the connector of environmental justice for everyone" (Grist 2004, n.p.). Katrina presented a second chance to rebuild the city under a framework of environmental justice and uncover the violations that residents had been suffering from for decades. The destruction offered an opportunity to not only underscore the racial and socioeconomic components of recovery, but to expose them publicly. With the federal government's inaction towards pressing issues, independent organizations emerged to take charge of rehabilitating New Orleans.

Anne Milling

The road to recovery was both long and inequitable. By Thanksgiving 2005, 45% of the city's streetcars and 53% of its buses remained inactive. Only 35% of food establishments, 32% of major hospitals, and less than 15% of public schools had reopened (David 2017). Residents of

the region suffered from disease, destruction, and mental trauma. Katrina's description as the "costliest hurricane in US history" with an estimated \$108 billion in damage coupled with government inaction angered local New Orleanians (CNN Library 2017, n.p.). Anyone who witnessed such ruin in person would question the slowness of the recovery. Anne Milling, upper-class civil activist and the creator of Women of the Storm, subscribed to the belief that if members of Congress visited the devastation, the Gulf Coast was more likely to receive additional federal funding. Milling's approach was a last resort to get the attention of politicians who seemed to be looking the other way.

Milling drew upon a lifetime of participation in women's organizations and leadership positions that provided women of her race and class background with opportunities to participate in public life. Milling was born in New Orleans on September 26, 1940, to well-connected parents. She attended Academy of the Sacred Heart, an all-girls Catholic school, before moving to Monroe, a small city in northeast Louisiana. In Monroe, she attended a public school and was exposed to varied, unfamiliar socioeconomic backgrounds, which she attributes as one of the most valuable experiences in her academic career. A number of activities and opportunities prepared her for future education—the French club, the Latin club, Thespians, secretary treasurer, a state championship in basketball, and being homecoming queen. Milling enrolled at Newcomb College, where she pledged Pi Beta Phi and later became her sorority's president and president of her senior class. Her reintegration back to New Orleans re-exposed Milling to the stringent hierarchy in the Krewe system, the social organizations that planned the Mardi Gras balls, and which did not readily embrace the young woman from Monroe (David 2017).

After graduating from Newcomb in 1962, Milling attended Yale University Graduate School with a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to earn a master's degree in history. After graduation, she returned to New Orleans and taught history for two years at Louise S. McGehee School, an all-girl preparatory school in the Garden District that attracted students from the wealthiest families of New Orleans. She chose to leave her position to start a family with Roswell King Milling, who would eventually become the president of Whitney National Bank. She gave birth to three sons and quickly became active in volunteer work with their schools and the Boy Scouts. She believes that her volunteer work was enabled by "the luxury of time," but also pulled her away from the stereotypical activities of wealthy white women at the time.

Through volunteer connections, she joined the Junior League of New Orleans, which taught her "how to organize, have an agenda for every meeting, assess, evaluate, incorporate diversity" (David 2017, 20). She served as president of the Junior League of New Orleans from 1977 to 1978. During her term, she established the Parenting Center at the Children's Hospital and raised \$95,000 for the Arts Council of New Orleans. She volunteered at the Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana and Feeding America, raised \$88,000 for Project Lazarus which provides residential care facilities for people living with HIV/AIDS, organized the Papal Visit Executive Committee, and served on the boards of the New Orleans Museum of Art and Loyola University. She won a number of awards: The Junior League's 1990 Sustainer of the Year, Times-Picayune's Loving Cup in 1995, Project Lazarus's Guardian Angel Award in 1998, and Powell-Desrosiers Award in 2016 (Strachan 2016). Milling was no stranger to community organizations and had a history of raising money, maneuvering through difficult political terrain, and making bold requests by the time Katrina hit in August of 2005

Emergence of Women of the Storm

Born out of a Thanksgiving dinner discussion, Milling waited until January 10 to form the core group that would make up the executive committee of Women of the Storm. This leadership team was made up of Milling, Peggy Laborde, Beverly Church, Pam Bryan, Nancy Marsiglia, and Liz Sloss (Women of the Storm 2016). All of the members hailed from prominent families and were highly active in local philanthropy. All were white. Unlike other relief groups, WOS offered avenues to help while residing outside Louisiana. One member recalled, “When we were away, we desperately wanted to do something. We’re the type that have all chaired a million things in the city, and we felt helpless. I’m [out of state] and not able to do anything to help the city. There wasn’t a venue to do it” (David 2017, 25). Peggy Laborde, one of the core members of WOS, explained their goal was “to be the voice of those who cannot be with us, the displaced, those with their homes destroyed” (David 2017, 39). Such national activism diverged from the executive members’ former experience with philanthropy. Milling described, “There were so many unknowns. In other organizations or fund-raising endeavors I’ve done, there’s pretty much a formula, a way of doing things, whether you’re doing a capital campaign for the university or for the museum. There’s a process that we can almost give to you. [WOS is] totally different from anything I’ve ever done” (David 2017, 25). Moreover, the elite women along with the rest of the city were at risk of being displaced by the storm. One member noted:

The difference is a sense of urgency and a sense of survival. Before, they were always projects to enhance. They were projects to certainly help people that needed it. Never have they been projects to help ourselves. We need help. Never in my life would I have considered myself a victim of anything. I’m a victim. And I am in danger of losing the place I live in and the place I love (David 2017, 26).

Women of the Storm quickly emerged as an ambitious organization aiming to pioneer a campaign to raise awareness of the situation along the Gulf Coast, and also to restore the wetlands. This was especially bold as the cost of the program was expected to be \$14 billion over the next three decades (James 2015). The proposed request to Washington was a grant for 50 percent share of the royalties generated from oil and gas revenues earned off Louisianan coastland to fund the coastal restoration (David 2017). WOS partnered with America’s WETLAND Foundation (AWF), focusing on coastal restoration education. AWF urged that the wetlands protect coastal areas from hurricanes and warned against their rapid deterioration (at a rate of twenty four square miles annually) (Women of the Storm 2016). The core of WOS argued that although a long-term and preventative measure, the wetlands were a relevant issue because their destruction exacerbated the damage of Katrina. They also deemed this a pressing problem as more than 200 square miles of important wetlands were eroded following hurricanes Katrina and Rita in addition to the loss of a football field of land every 38 minutes after those hurricanes (Women of the Storm 2016). Thus, the necessity of an immediate response to the wetlands issue was equated to the recovery of New Orleans itself.

The day after WOS’s first meeting, the Times-Picayune printed a story with the title “In Congress, Vast Majority Yet to See Ruins; Lawmakers Say Damage Tours Strengthen City’s Case for Aid”, emphasizing that members of Congress needed to see the effects of Katrina (David 2017, 27). Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) had made the trip in December and concluded that “it is one thing to read reports about levees and what went wrong. It is another to stand on top of them and have someone explain what happened” (David 2017, 27) Up to that point, only

36 members of the House and 23 members of the Senate, excluding the Louisiana delegation, had visited (Women of the Storm 2016). WOS quickly embraced national political publicity of the aftermath of Katrina as one of its primary goals. By January 23, a mission statement had been crafted:

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, an area in and around New Orleans which is seven times the size of Manhattan was devastated. Countless businesses, homes, and livelihoods were destroyed. Today, we extend a personal invitation to every member of Congress to visit New Orleans and our southern coast and experience first-hand the devastation and scope of this national tragedy. Once they see block by block, mile by mile the magnitude of this destruction...we urge them to return to Congress and support the following initiatives (David 2017, 168).

The four initiatives listed by the board of WOS were: a 50 percent share of revenues generated by offshore drilling, enhanced levee protection, coastal restoration, and the passage of a housing recovery plan called the Baker Bill (Women of the Storm 2016). The mission, created by the board, which was entirely white at the time, structured the organization around the needs that they deemed significant. For some the protection of the wetlands was a long-term project and didn't align with more immediate needs for the city, while others viewed it as important preventative action in the face of future storms. The lack of democratic, participatory creation of the mission and structure of the group contributed to future divisions.

In the months following WOS's creation, the executive committee began recruiting women from New Orleans and southern Louisiana to fill the 130 seats on the charter plane to Washington. The decision process was thus very exclusive since the number of seats was limited, so the executive committee came up with both objective and subjective criteria that members had to meet. A major consideration was racial and ethnic diversity. One member explained:

We really felt that it was important that this was a grassroots initiative, that it was as diversified as we could possibly make it, that that would make our voice that much louder and make us that much more credible. That was one of the number-one requirements, that this was not going to go anywhere unless you had a broad-based coalition (David 2016, 29).

Moreover, Milling knew that she wanted to genuinely represent metropolitan New Orleans for the trip to Washington, noting:

You've got African Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics, Vietnamese. That's what makes our area so unique. And just to go there with a group of Uptown white swells is not New Orleans, and not metropolitan New Orleans, and not Louisiana. We were trying to project an image that was very inclusive. I think everybody felt the same way. We want diversity. We want to promote that (David 2016, 30).

From there, recruiting black women, the majority minority group in the city, became a priority.

They initiated partnerships with civic organizations specifically for African-American women. Partnerships with The Links and Jack and Jill groups added to the racial diversity of Women of the Storm, but not the economic diversity since these organizations also consisted of

elite New Orleanian women. One Links member described others' membership as "an automatic screen that lets me know if this person comes from the right background and has the same values" (David 2016, 31). Women of the Storm was no different in using such membership as an indicator that these women held qualifications of status similar to themselves. Still, some members discussed seeking the "high falutin' African American women" that they were "always trying to find." Another woman explained, "Some of them are wonderful, and you can't say that they are all not. But they are hard to find. The ones that really want to work" (David 2016, 32). The criteria required strict adherence to specific characteristics, including a specialized camera presence, interview skills, and polished speech that would help pressure hard-pressed politicians. All were characteristics that could be found in the upper-class civic organizations within the black community, but attracting such women to WOS proved challenging.

By ignoring socioeconomic diversity, the group largely disregarded the widespread urban inequality that underscored many of the negative outcomes of Hurricane Katrina. A number of the characteristics they were looking for in candidates had different meanings to the WOS board than to women in the community. For example, the word "activist" did not refer to a community organizer or street activist to the core members of WOS, but to a volunteer on a charitable board or foundation. The recruited women were not blind to the role their racial or ethnic background played in the recruitment process. One African American Links member reflected, "I got a call, the attempt of the group to have some diversity. They thought they needed some minorities in the group. So no matter how you slice it, that's always the bottom line, unfortunately" (David 2016, 35). Still, even with the assumptions that the executive committee was searching for women of color to diversify the organization, many of the recruited women joined in order to speak on behalf of others. One member of The Links who joined said:

"Everybody was hit. Katrina didn't discriminate...So while there were sometimes positive effects of Katrina, everybody lost. It was just the degree of loss. So when people start sometimes apologizing and saying, 'I still have my home,' I said, 'Look what you lost. You lost your prior life. You lost what it was.' We all lost. (David 2016, 35).

She noted that:

It was amazing how many people said, 'You can just speak for us, on behalf of us.' Because we had several people that worked in St. Bernard Parish, we had a large amount that lived in New Orleans East. We had a large amount of people that lost their homes. And they said, 'If you could just speak on behalf of us, we should appreciate it' (David 2016, 35).

The responsibility as representatives of their communities overshadowed the racial undertone of their selection.

Since Asian and Hispanic communities of New Orleans made up only 2.3 and 2.1 percent of New Orleans's population respectively, the executive board saw their inclusion as a less pressing issue (James 2015). Still, they attempted to reach out to communities via prior contacts and a handful of Asian and Hispanic women joined. Gender was also not a barrier to joining the organization as two white men, Christian T. Brown and Charles Stern served as WOS coordinators early on (Women of the Storm 2016).

In addition to racially motivated recruitment, WOS reached out to numerous organizations formed in the aftermath of Katrina, including Citizens for One Greater New Orleans and Katrina Krewe. In their original search, one member explained that they were “trying to find people from every corner of this city and not just white people, not just black people—just people. We wanted women that were basically the same age, trying to raise families, you know—many working, some not working, but, you know, juggling, trying to live away for several months and then come back here and rebuild our lives” (David 2016, 36).

With new members came a hierarchal, top-down division of labor. Women of the Storm had three tiers: the core membership, the team captains, and a base membership. Core members gave logistical tasks to the eight captains that served as liaisons between the core membership and base members. These three roles are reflective of typical arrangements in other disaster-related emergent groups: an “active core,” “supporting circle,” and “nominal supporters” (Allen 2007, 36).

Understanding the necessity of making the organization as inclusive as possible, the one-day trip to Washington was free aside from the cost of lunch, paid for by donations. Many of the WOS organizers feared that members would drop out should they have to pay. Still, Milling and the rest of the core membership wanted a chartered plane for appearance purposes—they wanted politicians to take the organization seriously and hoped to appear united in the eyes of the press. Milling’s vision was to limit any burden to join the group or be a part of the trip and the \$70,000 to charter the plane was quickly raised. As one member recalled, “there are people struggling in this community and even people who have what you would call ‘money’ are in trouble. That was really Anne’s vision, to make sure that no one had to pay to go on this trip” (David 2016, 37). Still, the trip proved burdensome to working women whose time away from work would have financial consequences that could not be sacrificed. Such class dynamics were discussed in earlier meetings, but the day-long trip with the group, returning the same day as they departed, was as inclusive regarding time constraints as could be afforded.

Trip to Washington

Before the trip, the women received packets detailing talking points, partner assignments, and four lawmakers to whom each pair was assigned. A pre-written email for the lawmakers emphasized the ease of the visit: “All that is necessary from members of Congress is to block the necessary 26 hours for such a visit to one of the nation’s most historic cities and vital regions of our country...Certainly this is little to ask when so many are suffering” (David 2016, 31). After studying their assigned officials, the women reached out and made appointments in advance.

Following the chartered plane ride, the women were matched into racially diverse pairs. One of the matchers remembers, “what we tried to do was to pair people who were different. No best friends. We tried as much as possible to put African American women with white women or Spanish-speaking women with non-Spanish-speaking women. Of course, there were more of us than there were of the minorities, but we tried to be just about half and half, so that our teams didn’t look like they were cookie-cutter teams” (David 2016, 43). In response to the rationale for the pairings based on race, the member replied, “I think [the intent was] to put a face on it that we were the community and not just a group of do-good women...We wanted it to look like the face of New Orleans” (David 2016, 43).

The women marched upon Washington with blue-tarp umbrellas, which were representative of the actual tarps that covered damaged homes, and which were symbolic of the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. Organized by Beverly Church, a core member of WOS, the

intent was to create a visual of a united front among the women and to attract media attention before their appointments with the politicians. One participant explained the symbolism: “It was blue tarp. I mean it’s [the color of] a blue roof. Three buses of women and we all opened our umbrellas as soon as we got off of the bus. It was very visual. We walked for about a block and a half, and I was on the third bus, and you see these blue umbrellas going up and then you see them coming up the hill. I think it was very impressive.” Another member noted, “that’s what it represents, the people that are still struggling to get their lives together and their houses, everything” (David 2016, 65).

The WOS’s press conference was executed skillfully by three speakers: Anne Milling, Cheryl Teamer, and Mary Landrieu. Most of the airtime was given to Milling, who implored that “only 12 and a half percent of Congress ha[d] come to witness the devastation, and less than a third of our Senate ha[d] come. This is a major national catastrophe, but we don’t think [politicians] understand the magnitude of it. And that’s been a big disappointment” (David 2016, 67). Moreover, Milling expressed a need to learn from Katrina:

To fail to act, and thus to neglect the needs of this vital region of this country, set[s] an unimaginable precedent for responses to future catastrophes in our nation...It was a storm that was felt around the world. Yet, who would dream that 87 percent of the House of Representatives and 70 percent of the Senate haven’t found time to visit the site of the largest catastrophe in the history of America? (David 2016, 67).

The women extended hand-written invitations with dates for the politicians to choose from for their visits (Women of the Storm 2016). Each invitation was accompanied by a fill-in response card for lawmakers to circle one of four tour dates and provide their names and staff scheduling contact. Milling acknowledged that this method was very natural for upper-class New Orleanians:

When you want someone to see something or experience something, you extend an invitation, written or verbal. You invite them to your home if you want to discuss something. Probably subconsciously, I realized that members of the Congress were not coming, and it occurred to me, OK, if they won’t come on their own volition, then maybe perhaps if a group of us went there and invited them, it would make a difference (David 2016, 71).

These face-to-face encounters with lawmakers were intended to create a moral obligation for U.S. lawmakers to respond. With umbrellas in hand, the women brought their invitation to the halls of Congress in hopes of responses.

The Return

After returning from Washington, some members broke away from the group and focused on other pressing issues. Events and meetings proved difficult both financially and time-wise for many of the women, so active membership in WOS became burdensome. The Blue Tarp Fashion Show and Luncheon was held the February following the visit to Washington D.C. in hopes of raising awareness about the erosion of Louisiana’s wetlands (Feeney 2006). All of the women from the trip were invited, but few could attend for a number of factors. First, the event was held mid-day, which was difficult for women who did not have flexible work schedules. The

fundraiser for upper-class New Orleanians was held at Antoine's, a fancy French Quarter restaurant to which many of the women did not have easy access to or transportation. Moreover, the event required tickets and a number of the women were excluded because they could not purchase tickets. This event exposed the preexisting social and economic boundaries and, in turn, shifted the group's composition. Following the day in D.C., Women of the Storm struggled to maintain its diversity, and this came at the expense of three incredibly influential members: Sharon Alexis, Kim Dung Nguyen, and Beverly Wright.

Three Women

Sharon Alexis was an African American member of WOS who lived a middle-class life and worked full time. Before Katrina, Alexis worked as the director of the Gert Town Family Center through Catholic Charities, located in a predominantly poor, African American neighborhood that was significantly hit by Katrina—flooded with over six feet of water. In August 2005, Alexis evacuated to a hotel in Houston as her house lay under water. Eventually, Alexis relocated to Baton Rouge where the New Orleans Catholic Charities offices had temporarily moved (David 2016, 94).

Alexis worked in a mobile trailer during her time in Baton Rouge and when interviewed by a reporter for *New Orleans CityBusiness*, acknowledged the role race played in recovery:

It's all about trust. Just as they get a perspective from me, I get a perspective from them. If everyone learns to trust, we can get through this and rebuild a better New Orleans and take down the class and race boundaries. You look at people who make comments about the way African American people live, but they don't do anything about it. You need to acknowledge to help them and instead of talking about the negative, people need to open up their hearts and their heads. Out of darkness comes light (David 2016, 94).

Beyond the flooding, Alexis worried about the toxins in the water. Near Gert Town, the warehouse formerly owned by the Thompson Hayward Chemical Company lay idle. In the late 1980s, a study demonstrated that the dry-cleaning fluids and commercial pest control products it had housed were being released into the city's drainage system and soil (Buchanan 2012). Despite its closure in 1988, community members including Alexis were alarmed and concerned about the government response: pouring a slab of concrete over the hazardous waste. In *New Orleans CityBusiness*, Alexis described, "this is a crime that this is allowed to take place, both pre-Katrina and post-Katrina" (David 2016, 95).

Alexis used Women of the Storm as an outlet to express her frustration with lawmakers, specifically about the contamination threats to her community. Gert Town stood without electricity five months after the storm and insurance companies were reluctant to help those suffering (David 2016). After the storm, Alexis began both counseling other survivors and seeking counseling herself to deal with her frustration and anxiety. She noted, "I feel sometimes I just have to take some time off to deal with what I have to deal with" (David 2016, 96).

Only fifteen miles away from Gert Town, lay Versailles, a small neighborhood in New Orleans East that serves as the hub of New Orleans's Vietnamese American community. Kim Dung Nguyen worked at Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in the area, alongside other WOS members, including Sister Anne Marie Kim-Khuong and Tina Owen. Only a few days before the Blue Tarp Fashion Show, Mayor Nagin signed an executive order that determined the trajectory of recovery in Versailles. The policy opened the Chef Menteur Landfill along Chef Menteur

Highway to hold one fourth of Katrina's storm debris, about 6.5 million cubic yards of trash (Eaton 2006). Similar to the situation in Gert Town, Nguyen feared that the toxins from the debris would contaminate the community's water supply. Along with other community members, Nguyen started organizing to close the landfill. She coordinated volunteers, wrote grant proposals for the \$300,000 needed to repair the damaged church and sought assistance in replacing the computers and furniture destroyed during the storm (David 2016, 97). Like many of the women who left WOS, Nguyen did not have the luxury of time in recovery and was forced into a position of immediate action.

In between Gert Town and Versailles, the Agricultural Street Landfill operated for fifty years, starting in 1909. The Press Park townhomes of 1971, Gordon Plaza of 1980, and Morton Elementary School of 1983 covered the nearly 190 acres of landfill (Webster 2015). All of the communities were predominately African American. In 1993, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was pressured to perform soil tests and found that the site was laced with hazardous materials, leading to the landfill's identification as a "Superfund site," an area in need of clean-up (Webster 2015). Beverly Wright, director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University and co-chair of the National Black Environmental Justice Network, testified before the House of Representatives. She explained that the Agricultural Street Landfill was not an isolated occurrence, but one of many injustices in a larger history of environmental racism both pre- and post-Katrina:

Dozens of toxic time bombs along Louisiana's Mississippi River petrochemical corridor, the 85-mile stretch from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, make the region a major environmental justice battleground. Black communities all along the corridor have been fighting against environmental racism and demanding relocation to areas away from polluting facilities (David 2016, 97).

This fight was personal to Wright. Wright's home in New Orleans East was flooded and she lost all of her belongings. She reflected:

What people don't recognize—I recognized this when we were standing in the food stamp line—is that Katrina was a big equalizer. You had single mothers who had been living in subsidized housing, physicians, and ministers all in the Red Cross line trying to get food stamps because we had no money. The banks were under water. So if you had money, you couldn't get to it. And if you had money in the bank for that month, your job was gone, so you wouldn't have any the next month. We have such an unsure future. We have thousands and thousands of people, from every occupation, who no longer have a livelihood who now have to take handouts. When I got the food stamp card, I didn't know what EBT [Electronic Benefit Transfer] stood for. There are all kinds of things we are just finding out, and it is a humbling experience. Those of us who have nothing are appreciative, but you recognize that you are in a completely different position than where you have ever been in your whole life (David 2016, 98).

Following the trip to DC with WOS, Wright returned to her community and focused on eliminating health disparities and protecting the environment of the Gulf Coast from the perspective of communities of color.

Epilogue

Environmental racism continues to exist. The socio-economic discriminators that disproportionately placed minority communities in the middle of the storm continue to play a major role in shaping the demographic of neighborhoods today. Since Katrina, African American communities are still more likely to live in low-income areas near coal plants, waste facilities, and factories. Moreover, coal plants are more likely to be built in communities already inhabited by low-income people of color (New Orleans Health Department 2013). Health impacts are clear: higher rates of asthma and cancer, water contamination, and lead-poisoning are more prevalent in low-income neighborhoods (Yakupitiyage 2017). Indoor pollution from mold in flooded houses and subsequent lead contamination remain a potential health hazard. Such segregated living standards exacerbate health disparities in the city.

Industrial facilities continue to pollute the region. Louisiana's waterways are the third most polluted in the nation with "more than 12.6 million pounds of toxic chemicals" being released into the rivers and bayous in 2012 alone (Larino 2014, n.p.). The wetlands, important for ecosystem sustainability and the buffering of inland communities via slowed and absorbed floodwaters, are still severely endangered. Oil and gas development, rising sea levels, and invasions of "ravenous, beaver like rodents known as nutrias" have contributed to wetland erosion (Women of the Storm 2016, n.p.). The salinity of the Gulf water pushed in by storm surges killed vital vegetation in the freshwater areas. John Barras, a researcher for the U.S. Geological Survey, "estimates that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused about 17 or 18 years' worth of wetland loss in Louisiana" (Rastogi 2010). The members of Women of the Storm identified these needs and since Katrina, have continually worked to address them.

By December 31, 2009, WOS had convinced 57 senators and 149 representatives to visit New Orleans and in July of 2012, President Obama signed the RESTORE (Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States) Act (Association of Junior Leagues International 2018). This established a Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund in the U.S. Treasury Department and allocated eighty percent of civil penalties dealing with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill directly to the fund (Women of the Storm 2016). Women of the Storm continues to conduct educational tours across the country, offering data and personal stories to relay the urgency of wetland degradation. In terms of membership, the organization remains predominantly white.

Sharon Alexis, Kim Dung Nguyen, Beverly Wright, and Anne Milling were all successful in their separate endeavors. In March of 2013, Sharon Alexis won the Inspire Cross Awards for her work with The Salvation Army (St. Charles Avenue 2013). In August of 2006, Mayor C. Ray Nagin gave in to community pressure and ordered the Chef Menteur landfill closed, in part due to Nguyen's mobilization. Beverly Wright was named one of "theGrio's 100 history makers in the making," and has won numerous awards including the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leaders Award in 2006, the EPA Environmental Justice Achievement Award in 2008, and the Heinz Award in 2009 (Almond 2011). Each of the women continued their service in the aftermath of the storm.

WOS may have accomplished a more comprehensive platform of goals if diversity had been incorporated from the inception of the organization. By constructing a mission based on the needs agreed upon by an all upper-class, white board, the group discounted the demands of the communities its members were drawn from. This, in part, resulted in the exit of most minority members after the first visit to Washington D.C. The core WOS members were operating under a historical system of segregated civic activism and had limited accessibility to communities of

color. As noted by Jonathan Purtle, a program manager and health policy analyst at Drexel University's Center for Health Equality, groups that wanted to engage diverse communities following Katrina would "have to look in a lot of different places and there was really no central source of information" (Pittman 2011, n.p.). The WOS board was at a significant disadvantage in striving for diversity. Without proper contacts in place, they relied heavily on a few women from similar backgrounds.

The National Consensus Panel on Emergency Preparedness and Cultural Diversity has laid out a number of recommendations for integrating diversity as a priority in emergent organizations. To overcome the "longstanding inequities that exist in times of emergency," boards must first identify, locate, and maintain a profile of diverse racial, ethnic, immigrant, and limited English proficiency populations within their communities (Andrulis 2011, 3). Along with this comes an ongoing process of assessing community needs and assets. While WOS identified a need for African American women, they relied on upper-class contacts and ended up nominating women from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, needs of the communities that WOS aimed to represent were based off of the needs identified by the core members of the organization, which likely resulted in an assessment that was not fully reflective of the community. Second, sustainable partnerships must be established with community representatives. WOS created partnerships, but they were not sustainable as members felt excluded from events following the trip to Washington D.C. Focusing on inclusion and participatory practices may have assisted the core members in maintaining membership. The National Consensus Panel's third recommendation is to engage community representatives to design, implement, and evaluate emergency risk communication strategies to ensure that they are "appropriate to the community's culture, language, and values" (Andrulis 2011, 19). With the hierarchical structure of WOS, much of the decision-making processes were concentrated in a few members at the top, which may have contributed to the exit of minority members.

Women of the Storm was successful on many accounts—passing legislation, educating the general public, attracting a number of politicians to visit the devastation—but the organization suffered from structural and historical limitations in sustaining long-term participation of minority women. Women of the Storm's success with Congress lied with its diverse and far-reaching membership. Its failure in maintaining such membership did not allow for the maximization of its activism. Thus, diversity is not only a requirement for the start of an organization, but a priority to be maintained throughout the group's existence.

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