



# Mississippi front-line recovery work after Hurricane Katrina: An analysis of the intersections of gender, race, and class in advocacy, power relations, and health

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## ABSTRACT

By disrupting the routine practices and social structures that support social hierarchy, disasters provide a unique opportunity to observe how gender, race, and class power relations are enacted and reconstituted to shape health inequities. Using a feminist intersectional framework, we examine the dynamic relationships among a government/corporate alliance, front-line disaster recovery workers, and disadvantaged residents in Mississippi Gulf Coast communities in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which struck in August, 2005. Data were collected between January 2007 and October 2008 through field observations, public document analysis, and in-depth interviews with 32 front-line workers representing 27 non-governmental, nonprofit community-based organizations. Our analysis reveals how power relationships among these groups operated at the macro-level of the political economy as well as in individual lives, increasing health risks among both the disadvantaged and the front-line workers serving and advocating on their behalf. Socially situated as *outsiders-within*, front-line recovery workers operated in the middle ground between the disadvantaged populations they served and the powerful alliance that controlled access to essential resources. From this location, they both observed and were subject to the processes guiding the allocation of resources and their unequal outcomes. Following a brief period of hope for progressive change, recovery workers became increasingly stressed and fatigued, particularly from lack of communication and coordination, limited resources, insufficient capacity to meet overwhelming demands, and gendered and racialized mechanisms of marginalization and exclusion. The personal and collective health burdens borne by these front-line recovery workers – predominantly women and people of color – exemplify the ways in which the social relations of power and control contribute to health and social inequities.

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## Introduction

The World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) directly implicated social inequalities, including gender inequality, as causes of health disparities and called their elimination an ethical imperative (CSDH, 2008a,b). Among its top priorities, the CSDH called for understanding the role of power in producing health, recognizing a range of types of evidence, and shifting focus from individual bodies to the environment in communities and nations across the globe. In response, this research uses multiple types of evidence to explore the role of

power relationships in the experiences of front-line recovery workers along the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, a group largely overlooked in Katrina research.

In this study we examine how power relations among a government/corporate/elite alliance, front-line recovery workers, and the disadvantaged (low income, minority, and predominantly female) operated at the broader level of the macro political economy and at the micro-level of individual lives to produce health inequalities. Front-line disaster recovery workers situated in community-based organizations (CBOs) occupied an intermediary space between the vulnerable populations whose interests and needs they sought to serve and to promote and multiple levels of government, elite, and corporate entities—where the decisions and policies about recovery resources were shaped and directed (cf., Lipsky, 1980; Lowe & Shaw, 2009; Luft, 2009). This position in the middle provided these workers—most of whom are white women

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and people of color—a unique perspective on the health consequences of social inequalities for the communities, families, and individuals they serve. And this position, as well as the context of their recovery work, also affected their personal health and well-being.

#### *Approach: feminist intersectional framework*

Using a feminist intersectional framework addresses CSDH priorities by analyzing the contexts and social relationships where power is exerted, resisted, transformed, and reproduced across multiple levels (societal/community/individual) and systems of inequality (e.g., gender, race, class, nation). This approach complicates traditional gender-based analyses by treating gender as a set of social relations, not merely as characteristics of individuals that vary across race, ethnicity, class and other dimensions of social inequality (Hankivsky et al., 2010; Weber, 2006; Weber, 2010; Weber & Castellow, in press; Weber & Fore, 2007; Weber & Parra-Medina, 2003). By focusing on the intersection of multiple inequalities, an intersectional approach also foregrounds the experiences and perceptions of those occupying social positions that provide a unique angle of vision on the workings of power. In one such position, labeled by intersectional scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1986) as *outsiders-within*—incumbents have some access to dominant group knowledge without the full power afforded dominant group members. We contend that from the vantage point of outsiders-within, these front-line recovery workers operating in CBOs along the Mississippi Gulf Coast were able to both observe and to experience the mechanisms producing dominance and subordination in the aftermath of disaster.

The broader focus of this research is the situation itself — post-Katrina recovery work in Mississippi — rather than people as units, individually or collectively. Intersectional attention to power and gender, race, and class relations highlights the perceptions of the disadvantaged and vulnerable populations as well as the ways in which disadvantage is tied to the privilege and control of more powerful groups (Collins, 2000; Hankivsky et al., 2010; Weber, 2010). Examining the experiences of front-line recovery workers within this broader social context—the vulnerability of the communities they served and the power of the institutions they confronted—broadens our understanding of 1) risks to recovery-worker health and well-being, including work stress and burnout and 2) the role of macro-level social inequalities in producing and maintaining health disparities and inequities.

#### *Political and economic context of Mississippi Gulf Coast post-Katrina recovery work*

When Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, it became the most devastating and costliest hurricane in United States history. It is estimated that the hurricane impacted 90,000 square miles, displaced 1.5 million people, initially killed over 1300 people and resulted in costs of over US\$80 billion (FEMA, 2005). While considerable national media and scholarly attention focused almost exclusively on New Orleans, the destruction in Mississippi alone would qualify as the most devastating natural disaster in U.S. history (Savidge, 2006).

Before Hurricane Katrina, the Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama had among the highest national levels of race, class, and gender inequality and the worst quality of life indicators among the poor, people of color, and women. When Katrina made landfall in 2005, Mississippi had been ranked worst in the nation for six straight years in the overall status of women in political participation, employment and earnings, social and economic autonomy, reproductive rights, and health and well-

being (Gault, Hartmann, Jones-DeWeever, Werschkel, & Williams, 2005). The extreme inequality in these Southern states reflects a legacy of government/elite/corporate alliances that promoted slavery and the plantation system, post-slavery agricultural peonage, the convict-lease system, emerging agribusiness, and more recently the non-union, low-wage, and internationally driven industrial/retail sector (Goldfield, 1997; Key, 1949; Lowe & Shaw, 2009; Williamson, 1984). Currently, the Mississippi Gulf Coast has high levels of poverty, particularly among women of color; a substantial African American community; a small but important Asian American community; a growing Latino population; and an economy largely based on tourism, oil, and fishing (Cutter et al., 2006; Gault et al., 2005; Jones-DeWeever, 2008).

In the aftermath of Katrina, opportunities to improve conditions for many Mississippi Gulf Coast residents clearly existed. Mississippi officials were well positioned to procure relief funds from the Republican-dominated federal government. Republicans controlled state government, its congressional delegation included Senator Cochran on the appropriations committee, and Governor Haley Barbour was both former head of the Republican National Committee and of his own Washington lobbyist firm. An indication of the power and influence of Mississippi's political leadership was the initial federal allocation of US\$3.4 billion in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds for rebuilding housing and other infrastructure in Mississippi, an amount larger than the entire state budget (USDHS, 2010). Yet despite the initial enthusiasm and availability of new resources, the outcomes in Mississippi five years after Katrina suggest a continuing concentration of resources within existing structures and increased social inequalities, similar to the situation after Hurricane Camille hit Mississippi in 1969 (Smith, in press).

Post-Katrina Mississippi mirrored Klein's (2007) description of the recovery phase immediately following a massive collective disaster. In the context of generalized public disorientation and chaos and under the guise of service to recovery, corporate powers may advance unpopular agendas, including for-profit enterprises, in ways that would be unacceptable under normal circumstances (e.g., no-bid contracts, relief from adherence to labor laws, less transparent government and business transactions). In post-Katrina Mississippi, Governor Barbour instituted a tightly controlled distribution process for recovery funds. Priorities included the gaming and tourist industries and homeowners who already had insurance. The Mississippi legislature's first post-Katrina act was to eliminate the prohibition of on-land gaming so that casinos could move from offshore barges. The state received approval for a waiver from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to divert US\$600 million in CDBG funds earmarked for low-income housing to expand the Port of Gulfport (Governor's Office, 2008; STEPS, 2009).

This close connection between corporate and government interests harmed low-income and other vulnerable groups in Mississippi. Four years post-Katrina, Mississippi had spent only 52% of its Disaster Recovery Grant funds. By 2008, the state had spent virtually none of its allocation for public housing while spending 99% of its US\$1.38 billion Phase 1 homeowner grants designated for homeowners with insurance. In addition, the state had diverted US\$600 million of housing funds to Port of Gulfport expansion and US\$800 million to economic development (STEPS, 2009). In the face of massive social and environmental destruction, these political priorities, along with stalemates resulting from unspent or diverted funds, further threatened the survival of more vulnerable communities. Operating in the middle between government and corporate elites and the disadvantaged, front-line recovery workers in Mississippi coastal communities had unique personal and collective perspectives on this social, political, and economic

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