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From Vulnerability to Resilience: an exploration of gender performance art and how it has enabled young women's empowerment in post-hurricane New Orleans

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Abstract

This research provides a qualitative account of how one group of LGBTQ young women created a space for empowerment in Post Katrina and Post Isaac New Orleans. There is very little research on sexualities in post-disaster settings but what does exist indicates that LGBTQ people have post-disaster experiences that are specific to their sexualities. There is further concern that LGBTQ people may be a highly vulnerable group due to pre-existing social and cultural discrimination. The case is also similar for youth. Much research exists on the needs of children post-disaster but very little addresses those who could be classed as 'young adults.' This paper begins to fill this void and explores how gender performance has enabled a group of disaster-affected young women to 'write their own bodies' and challenge traditional gender roles and relations.

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1. Introduction: What Katrina Did

New Orleans, Louisiana has long been considered to be 'disaster-prone.' Some of the strongest hurricanes have battered the city, most notably, Hurricane Katrina in 2005. On 28th August 2005, Katrina made landfall and brought with her tropical storms which in turn gave rise to extreme flooding. This resulted in the failure of the city's already

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inadequate levees. Water poured into the city from the sky and from the two swollen rivers causing 80% of the city to be underwater after two days. Many people could not leave. Many more were displaced all over the United States. It took months to be able to return. Some never did. Months later, those that did return found their beloved city changed forever. In fact, the scars of Katrina can still be seen across the rich and the poorer neighborhoods. Almost everyone was affected in some way. Among them were adolescent girls and young women. These two categories rarely receive attention in post-disaster activism and scholarship but both possess capacities and vulnerabilities unique to their cohort. Indeed, this research indicates that young women can be a driving force for transformation that can change things for the better in years to come. This article focuses on a specific group of adolescent girls and young women who were affected by Katrina. The bond that ties them together is that they are currently involved with gender performance, through participating as an actor or as an audience member in a group called 'The Kings'. During the field research it emerged that negotiating sexuality and gender issues can be more positive by being part of a gender performance group. The landscape of the gender performance 'industry' changed significantly after Katrina. This was particularly the case for the 'Kings.' This paper aims to draw attention to the resilience of the young women who rebuilt 'The Kings' and highlight how sexuality and youth are important areas of enquiry and resources for post-disaster mitigation.

2. Gender, Sexuality, Youth and Disasters

The late-1990's marked the start of an era for gender and disasters and gender analysis has become integral at all levels of disaster mitigation documenting the wide range of skills and resources women utilize in the face of disaster at individual, household, community and organizational levels provoking lively and exciting discussion, research and theoretical discussion (Brunsma et.al. 2000; Fothergill 1998:12). However, despite gender being recognized as an important post-disaster 'issue' the diverse gendered needs and interests of young women, including sexualities have continued to be marginalized (Overton 2007:13; Cupples 2007; Enarson 2000; Enarson and Meyreles 2004; Fordham 1998). This may be influenced by the reasons gender has become an important concern for disaster actors. For example, Holzmann and Kozel (2007) suggest that improving women's access to risk management can create efficiency gains bringing economic gains rather than empowerment. Post-event too, research shows that even where projects are promoted as being 'gendered,' women's participation is designed to benefit the family not the women themselves and often reinforces traditional maternal roles (Bradshaw 2002). This goes some way to explain why young women and adolescent girls have been largely absent from all phases of disaster research and practice. That is, the needs of 'women' as a whole often translate to maternal roles so that the term 'gender' becomes short-hand for adult women as mothers and/or caregivers. This not only reduces women to their maternal roles but also excludes all other expressions of gender identities, which include 'non-reproductive' expressions of sexualities.

Yet, sexualities and gender are inextricably linked as recorded by Rashid and Michaud's research about the experiences of adolescent girls in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the 1998 floods (2000). Their research explicitly explores adolescent girls' feelings around sexuality issues such as preserving virginity and menstruation. It also highlights their conflicting relationships with freedom and shame. Whilst these sexuality issues are linked to the reproductive, they also draw attention to other aspects of the girls' lives around freedom of movement and independence. Despite highlighting that anxieties over 'gendered-sexuality' norms had far-reaching implications on girls' health, identity, family and community relations (Rashid and Michaud 2000), no further research in this or any other cultural context began to emerge until at least ten years later and even this has been limited (see Coalition for Adolescent Girls 2012; Haynes 2010; Tanner 2010). Very little attention is given to these groups by disaster actors and even less is known about their experiences. Adolescent girls have recently entered the policy arena which is a step forward (Plan International 2013). Young women, along with sexuality remain absent.

By sexuality being discussed through the lense of maternity, sexuality is also often conflated with sex. Furthermore, sexuality is also framed negatively through issues of health as a public concern rather than pleasure (Jolly 2000). Sexuality is part of all aspects of life and therefore, it is likely that in times of crisis, experiences will be affected. Not least because sexuality is also embedded in social and cultural norms regulated by power relations. That can be amplified and exacerbated (Bradshaw 2002; Enarson and Morrow 1998). As young people's sexualities are often framed by adult concerns (Bucholtz 2002:537) there room to find out what young people think about their own lives.

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