

## **KATRINA, NATURAL DISASTERS & SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

### *Why does rape occur in the aftermath of natural disasters and other humanitarian crises?*

Rape and violence against women in the aftermath of humanitarian disasters is no new problem. Internationally, rape in refugee situations has become quite common. According to the Human Rights Watch document “Sexual Violence Against Refugees: Guidelines on Prevention and Response”, there are several causes or circumstances which allow sexual attacks to take place:

1. Society
  - a. The collapse of traditional societal support mechanisms (social sanctions, norms for proper behavior, etc.) when refugees are forced to flee or to live in camp surroundings. In particular, the communal support systems for the protection of vulnerable individuals may no longer be present.
  - b. Male attitudes of disrespect towards women may be instrumental in causing incidents of sexual violence. For example, within a camp, men may look upon unaccompanied women and girls as common sexual property.
  - c. Psychological strain on refugee men in not being able to assume normal cultural, social and economic roles, may cause aggressive behavior towards women. Many other aspects of refugee life can aggravate this, including idleness, anger at loss of control and power, uncertainty about the future, and frustration with living conditions.
  - d. Alcohol and drug abuse can result in violent behavior within families and communities. Such abuse is often linked to boredom, depression and stress.
2. Vulnerability
  - a. Females who are on their own for whatever reason, whether they are single, widowed, abandoned, unaccompanied minors, lone heads of households, or women who have been separated from male family members by the chaos of the situation, are all particularly at risk of sexual violence.
3. Camp design and location
  - a. The design and social structure in many camps may contribute to the likelihood of protection problems. Camps are often overcrowded. Unrelated families may need to share communal living and sleeping space. In effect, such refugees are living among strangers.
  - b. The lack of police protection and general lawlessness in some camps is also a factor.

In the aftermath of Katrina, we are seeing a similar refugee situation with hundreds of internally displaced persons. Rape and violence has become commonplace and may be exacerbated by the circumstances mentioned above.

There is, however, much research that has been done around prevention of sexual violence within refugee situations, like those presented after Hurricane Katrina. Including gender analyses in disaster planning is crucial. Many lessons can be learned from the international work that has been done on this topic. Below is a brief bibliography of such sources.

The rapes and sexual violence that is occurring in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is unacceptable and could have been prevented. As a community, we should learn from this and ensure that any future natural or man-made disasters do not leave women and children vulnerable to sexual violence.

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