A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

The voices of women

Elaine Enarson and Betty Hearn Morrow

> *Social structures not only provide the context, form and meaning for response, but are a critical part of vulnerability. The vulnerability of women stems from cultural, political, and economic conditions. The poor and destitute are the most vulnerable, and they are disproportionately women and their dependent children.*
>
> Document of the UN Disaster Management Training Programme (Wiest, Mocellin and Motsisi 1994: 11)

The "official story" of disasters generally overlooks women's experiences as victims, as well as responders. In this chapter, we use the case of Hurricane Andrew to illustrate the need to account more effectively for the experiences and insights of women if we are to understand better households and communities hit by disaster. Our qualitative findings are synthesized around four composite profiles which we develop to introduce some important themes which emerged from our work. In keeping with our goal of illustrating the potential of a gendered analysis for advancing theoretical and empirical work, as well as our argument that a better understanding of women's diverse experiences will promote more effective disaster planning and response, we end by suggesting a series of research questions and proposing a set of policy recommendations to disaster planners and responders.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF A GENDERED ANALYSIS

Most disaster work assumes a gender-neutral social system in spite of a growing body of research documenting the significance of gender and gender relations in social life (Hess and Ferree 1987; Epstein 1988; Anderson 1988). The complexities of social structure and culture typically result in different social environments and world views for men and women. It follows, then, that there exists a gendered dimension to the effects and responses associated with any social event, particularly one as significant as a disaster (Morrow and Enarson 1994). As Shaw (1989: 13) states, "In any society in which elaborate gender domains are constructed, then both hazards and relief measures will be

'gendered' with different consequences for men and women." This implies more than a simplistic bipolar view of gender as might be evidenced, for example, by simply comparing survey responses of male and female victims. Contemporary gender studies, while emphasizing the unique experiences of women and men, also demand an exploration of the complex intersections of gender with other social dimensions such as race/ethnicity, culture, and class (Brydon and Chant 1989; Ward 1990; Collins 1990; Peterson and Runyan 1993; Zinn and Dill 1994).

To understand fully household disaster response, an accurate analysis of patterns of domestic labor and decision making is essential. Without generalizing about women as a class, several basic social arrangements persist across a wide diversity of cultures. As mothers, partners, daughters, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts, women continue to provide the bulk of household labor and family caregiving (Finch and Groves 1983; Abel and Nelson 1990), regardless of their participation in the formal labor force (Hochschild 1989; Shelton 1992). Additionally, the proportion of households headed by women has increased dramatically – it is now 25 per cent of all US households, even higher among minorities, the elderly, and the poor (Scott 1984; Sidel 1987; Ahlburg and DeVita 1992; O'Hare 1992). Outside the household most caregiving work is also done by women, although this is not reflected in the lines of control and authority within caregiving occupations and organizations (Acker 1991; Reskin and Padavic 1994). While playing crucial public and private roles, women's voices have been largely absent or ignored in organizational and community policy-making, including decisions about disaster response and recovery.

THE NEGLECT OF GENDER IN DISASTER RESEARCH

The effects of gender and gender relations have been virtually ignored in most disaster research, with few sources addressing women's wide range of involvement in disaster-stricken households and communities. Women and gender still remain largely absent even as organizing categories in the disaster literature. While sex as a bipolar variable is sometimes analyzed in quantitative studies, a complex gendered analysis is rare. Attempts to quantify household recovery by measuring domestic assets, for example, usually neglect the human resource of domestic labor, such as how much time women have available for household recovery activities (Bates and Peacock 1993). In contrast, the dimensions of race and ethnicity, culture, and social class are increasingly recognized as significant factors influencing household and community experience and recovery (Drabek and Key 1982; Peacock and Bates 1982; Bolin and Bolton 1986; Perry and Mushkatel 1986; Oliver-Smith 1990; Perry and Lindell 1991; Peacock, Gladwin and Girard 1993; Phillips 1993b; Blaikie *et al.* 1994).

There are exceptions to the neglect of women in disaster research. (For a literature review on gender and disaster, see Fothergill 1996.) In his classic analysis of the Buffalo Creek flood, Erikson (1976) relates aspects of male

gender identity to psychological disaster recovery. Poniatowska's testimonial from the 1985 Mexico City earthquake is rich with the experiences of women, as both victims and rescuers (Poniatowska 1995). A video documentary by Carol Ward poignantly captures the experiences and emotions of women from a small fishing village in South Carolina after Hurricane Hugo (Ward 1990). Gender differences in the consequences of disasters and various assistance programs are beginning to be examined (Schroeder 1987; Shaw 1989; Phifer 1990; Nigg and Tierney 1990; Chowdhury *et al.* 1993; Khondker 1996). In the area of family response, several studies suggest that crisis reactions tend to follow traditional gender roles which, in turn, limit their effectiveness (Hill and Hansen 1962; Drabek 1986; Hoffman 1993). Analyses of household evacuation decisions suggests that women consult more frequently with relatives and friends and are more apt to believe and heed a warning (Drabek and Boggs 1968; Turner *et al.* 1981; Neal, Perry and Hawkins 1982).

The high degree to which women are active in community organizations associated with disaster issues is beginning to be recognized (Neal and Phillips 1990; Leavitt 1992) and was especially well documented after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake (deBarbieri and Guzman 1986; Rabell and Teran 1986; Massolo and Schteingart 1987). Furthermore, international relief agencies are increasingly recognizing the status and role-related vulnerabilities faced by women during emergencies, as well as their special needs as refugees (League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 1991). It is also important that women's capabilities and informal mobilization efforts be effectively utilized in disaster response (Wiest, Mocellin and Motsisi 1994).

Important as these exceptions are, it is hard to escape the conclusion that theory and research in disaster studies have generally failed to acknowledge the myriad, but not always obvious, ways in which gender impacts the lives of victims and responders. This neglect, along with the gender bias sometimes attached to disaster research, results in programs which do not adequately reflect an understanding of female victims' daily lives and which fail to utilize effectively the knowledge and skills of over half of the population.

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

In order to understand better the implications of gender and the roles of women in household and community preparation, relief, and recovery efforts, we conducted a qualitative sociological analysis of women's experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. Data were collected through interviews and focus groups with victims and service providers, observations in the tent cities, service centers, provider organizations, and at meetings of emergent community groups. We also drew from other projects of the FIU Disaster Research Team, including over fifty interviews in the tent cities and more than forty interviews with agency caseworkers. Our goal was not to represent women as a group or to speak for most women, but rather to study selected segments of the victim and caregiver

populations whose circumstances and experiences provide important insights and perspectives. We interviewed immigrant and migrant women from Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, and Central America, African-American single mothers and grandmothers, women construction workers, business owners, agricultural workers, teachers, social workers, battered and homeless women.

We have organized our findings around the experiences of four fictionalized women – a social worker, a single grandmother in public housing, a relocated trailer camp resident, and a small business owner. In a field often dominated by the abstract and impersonal, we present the particularistic first-person voice by introducing the many women we met as composites, rather than as literal portraits. This technique protects individual anonymity while personalizing the themes addressed. The portraits are representative of the situations and experiences of women we interviewed, heard about, read about, and observed during a period of great crisis. We weave and merge observations and feelings selectively, carefully reflecting the diversity of our sample and avoiding unrepresentative implications. We focus on patterns of common situation and experience to theorize about women's disaster experiences and, more broadly, about how gender, race, and class relations interact in disaster-impacted communities and households. All quotations are transcribed from recorded interviews and are repeated verbatim.

THEY SPEAK FOR MANY

Irene Phillips: social worker

A year and a half after Hurricane Andrew, the couches and chairs are still covered with plastic amid great piles of building materials and tools dominating Irene's living room. Her husband works for a building company and has been repairing their house in his spare time, of which he has little these days. John was transferred north after his work site was destroyed, increasing his commute to over two hours each day. As a result, he reluctantly agreed to hire out some of the work, if skilled and reliable people can be found. This Anglo couple, in their mid-thirties, are long-time residents of a working class neighborhood of small homes in Cutler Ridge. They are the parents of a 16-year-old son and a 12-year-old daughter.

Sitting in the middle of construction materials and boxes, Irene tells us how lucky she feels – lucky to have been able to evacuate her family to her brother's home in North Miami; lucky to have had sufficient insurance to replace the roof and rebuild the four interior rooms; lucky to have a home that is still habitable. Before evacuating, her husband and son put up homemade plywood hurricane shutters and packed up the family's business and personal papers, thereby lessening their losses.

Irene was indeed luckier than those who had no help preparing for the storm. We learned of the futile efforts of a group of women in public housing to cover

their apartment windows with leftover construction materials and of an elderly woman who tried to show her young grandchildren how to nail closet doors over their windows. In general, women living without partners are less likely to have the resources – money, transportation, and labor – to complete disaster preparations. Thus, their unprotected homes tend to sustain high levels of damage. Single women, particularly widows and mothers of young children, are especially vulnerable if they lack nearby kin. We heard repeated reports, one from a witnessing construction worker, of unscrupulous contractors systematically targeting single women in desperate need of home repairs. Women who spoke little or no English were particularly vulnerable to coercive practices. Contracts were signed in ignorance or under duress, only to have their hopes dashed when work was not completed and advance deposits lost when contractors skipped town. We found no evidence that authorities considered that gender might be a factor in contractor fraud.

Irene speaks in the voice of the "guilty survivor" – reluctant to complain about her living conditions when so many have it much worse. When not at her job, she works on the house with her son and husband and negotiates with suppliers and workers. She enjoys the hands-on work and speaks with a certain pride about managing the project, but it is hard and frustrating work, consuming every spare moment. "We do our planning in the mornings, 6 o'clock in the morning. We go through all the different things that have to be done for the day. In the evening when we get home we check the work that was done."

Their modest house has become cramped since the storm. When county inspectors declared that the nursing facility where Irene's mother-in-law lived was unsafe, their dining room was converted into a bedroom for her. While John does not help with her special care, Irene counts herself lucky that only one person came to live with them. As a result of the storm, six extra people have been living next door for over a year. Once happily past the labor-intensive years of having a young family, Irene's neighbor is again hard at work keeping a large household going, only this time under very trying circumstances.

In a street still only half occupied, the new household members next door provide playmates for Irene's daughter, but the child misses her old friends who moved away after the storm. She complains of headaches and sleeps a lot, but Irene expresses more concern for her older son, a high school senior. He hates the long bus trip to the undamaged, but crowded high school he was transferred to and constantly threatens to drop out to work on the house.

Our respondents cited numerous instances of school-age children suffering long-term effects from Andrew and of the tremendous strain felt by their teachers, counselors, and parents. The public school system reopened only two weeks after the hurricane destroyed or severely damaged over thirty schools, as well as the homes of many public school employees. (For an analysis of the school system's response to Hurricane Andrew, see Provenzo, Jr. and Fradd 1995.) Tens of thousands of children were uprooted, bused long distances, and then relocated again when old schools reopened. Younger children dissolved into

tears when winds rattled the school windows. One teacher told of a first-grade student who, when given a donated set of crayons, quickly put them away in his desk. Asked why he wasn't using them, he replied, "I don't want them to blow away."

Older children felt the loss of peers, school activities, and recreational facilities. High school seniors graduated from strange schools where they didn't feel they belonged (Marks 1993). Homestead Senior High students spent an entire academic year without a school or community library. It was over a year before the first movie theater reopened in South Dade. The despondency and uncertainty experienced by young people was expressed in many ways, including depression, withdrawal, disruptive behavior, and violence.

Because authorities felt it was in the best interests of the children to begin the school year as soon as possible, teachers and staff were forced to teach under terrible conditions. We heard countless stories of their struggles to reach out to suffering students while dealing with major disruptions in their own lives, including distraught families, damaged homes, and lengthy commutes in impossible traffic. Their heroic efforts are well represented in this letter we received from a woman whose nearly destroyed home served as a refuge for an extended family of eleven people:

> After two weeks of exhaustive cleaning and primitive survival, some sort of normalcy returned to my life: I reported to work. The tired faces of our faculty reported to the puddle-filled, smelly [school] cafeteria. If those first two weeks of the aftermath had been difficult, it was nothing like the months to follow. As a hurricane victim I faced my own tremendous loss and frustrating aftermath. And as a teacher I had to leave my personal sorrows behind and face my classes of tired, mournful and bewildered student-hurricane-victims . . . Perhaps it was seeing my students' tremendous difficulties that gave me the strength to get up every morning, take a cold shower by candlelight, and report to work.
>
> (Colina 1995)

In the spring she was chosen Teacher of the Year.

Within days of Andrew, private and public agencies "set up their tents" and thousands of volunteer and paid workers attempted the daunting task of bringing services into the area. In Irene's case, only days after the hurricane she was back at work at the non-profit family service agency where she has worked for 10 years. Though it has been a full year and a half since the storm, Irene still puts in long hours dealing with an expanded case load. She confided about her struggle to fight off overwhelming feelings of helplessness and depression.

As caseworkers, nurses, counselors, and relief workers, women were instrumental in providing services. The concentration of women in human service occupations puts them at special risk during disaster recovery. The physical and emotional demands of the "double day" at work and at home expanded exponentially after Hurricane Andrew. Most South Florida organizations did not

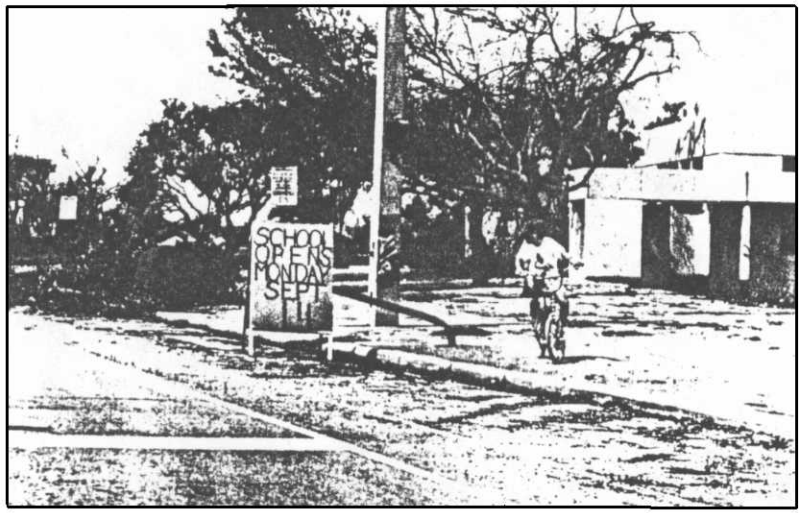

Plate 7.1 Schools were opened only three weeks after the storm, often under very difficult conditions
Source: Paul Rubiera/*Miami Herald*

anticipate that, as the recovery period lengthened, workers' emotional needs would increasingly impact organizational effectiveness. While some agencies eventually received funds for employee counseling and stress workshops, these initiatives would have been more beneficial had they been available earlier.

Following a major disaster communities turn in many directions for help – to government and their elected leaders, to state and federal agencies, and to the military – historically male-dominated institutions. And yet, female employees are a majority in many, if not most, organizations providing relief and recovery services. While disaster work typically assumes a male persona in public discourse, the skills and training, as well as social and emotional resources, of women are central to both short- and long-term community recovery. Nevertheless, with some notable exceptions, such as Beth Von Werne at Catholic Community Services and Mary Louise Cole, Director of ICARE (an interfaith coalition of groups involved in rebuilding homes), women were severely underrepresented among those making important decisions about community recovery and rebuilding after Hurricane Andrew.

Disaster-hit communities can anticipate the loss of an often invisible and always undervalued resource – the many volunteer hours women give to community causes which so often supplement or replace direct social and community services. After Hurricane Andrew, schools, libraries, scouting programs, churches, and health and social services agencies, such as the American Red Cross, felt the absence of women whose volunteer labor was suddenly

redirected to meeting more pressing household needs. The influx of relief workers into a community is no substitute for the long-term loss of local volunteers. Disaster planners need to anticipate the loss of local women's voluntary labor after a major disaster.

Hurricane Andrew disrupted, but did not destroy, the routines of social life. Irene still treasures her Wednesday evenings singing with the women's choir which reassembled a month after the storm carried off the church roof. This group has always been an important support group for her, but never more so than now. Similarly, women throughout the area came together, sometimes for the first time, to respond to community needs. Haitian women from Homestead and Florida City organized a community festival celebrating Haitian culture and the coming of spring. Others designed and coordinated projects to replant public spaces, to clear playgrounds, to plan social activities – networking to rebuild a sense of community and regain perspective on their own lives.

Like so many women, Irene wishes she and her husband talked less about drywall and more about what they are going through, but she says John is even more reluctant now to talk about his feelings or to ask for help. Many observers noted that men seemed to focus on the instrumental tasks of rebuilding, both at home and at work, and to withdraw from their partners and children. The reported accounts of increased incidence of male suicide, alcoholism, and violence are vivid indicators of men's pain and distress (for example, Wallace 1993; Laudisio 1993; Strouse 1995). Future disaster research is needed to document the emotional responses of men, as well as the resources that sustain them. Speaking of John reminds Irene suddenly of the time and she apologetically ends the conversation. As we head toward the front door, she stops to proudly show us the new tile in the bathroom.

Pat Higgins: head of a multigenerational family

When the Army trucks finally rolled into the grounds near her public housing complex in an isolated neighborhood in rural South Dade, Pat and the other women of Garden Grove were ready. Days before they had organized a cleaning brigade and set up a mass kitchen for their housing project in the cafeteria of the badly damaged elementary school across the street. The troops were a welcome sight after days of struggling without outside help. Since their housing complex stood directly in Andrew's path, the experts estimated that it had been blasted with 175 mph winds (Sheets 1993a; Wakimoto and Black 1994). While thankful to have survived that horrific night and to still have a roof, albeit damaged, Pat, her two adult children, and three grandchildren lost nearly everything they owned. Clothing and possessions not destroyed during the storm were soon lost to the rain and mildew.

The women of Garden Grove, most of whom are elderly and/or have small dependent children, received no help in preparing their buildings for Andrew. The walls of their buildings had come through intact, but the unprotected

windows were blown out early in the storm, allowing the wind to tear through the apartments, lifting the roofs off some. Shutters might have saved their homes. Ironically, the women knew that sheets of plywood were in a locked storage room on the property, but had no way to get it out to cover their windows. However, several days later Pat joined with other residents to break open the storage room door and use the plywood to try to close out the elements and secure their apartments. Pat is still angry with the property managers. "Everything was right there. All they had to do was open it up and give us some nails – we could have did it ourselves. They didn't want to do it. They didn't tell us anything."

Without electricity, telephones, or newspapers, the women relied on word of mouth to locate emergency and relief aid. With weary kids in tow in the stifling heat of late summer – when every tree had lost its leaves and the foul odors of decaying refuse thickened the air – they struggled to find drinking water, food, diapers, shoes, towels, medicines, and glasses. The Red Cross vouchers she eventually received didn't go far. "I had gotten vouchers – one for food. The food I couldn't spend because they gave it for a store that wasn't open . . . One for clothes, and one for linens. But all I could do was buy me two things and my son two things – him a sheet set for his bed, one for my bed, and four towels."

During the two months the military camped in Garden Grove, they provided a bright spot in an otherwise dismal world. The soldiers helped clear debris and secure their apartments, provided food, water, and first-aid. Perhaps even more important, they played with the children, listened to the adults, and provided hope. When they pulled out, however, little permanent progress had been made toward repairing their homes and community. Pat felt deserted and cheated, "I really didn't feel like – that we got everything that we should have got. But I know that they're trying to get us to be self-sufficient and start getting back on our feet . . . I think they left us too early." As an African-American head of household supporting a multigenerational family, Pat knows plenty about self-sufficiency, advocacy, and community organizing. Laughing aloud, she recalls the day she publicly rebuked government officials touring the disaster zone. Her advocacy efforts got results, "I went to the City Hall and had them take buses and vans to take the people to wash their clothes, take them shopping, spend their vouchers they got from the Red Cross and stuff like that."

Because Hurricane Andrew's victims were spread over such a large area, it was often necessary to travel long distances under difficult circumstances to reach disaster relief centers. Confusion about available relief and how to get it added to victims' frustration. Pat told us about the terrible day she took three different buses to reach a particular relief center downtown, carrying her infant grandchild, only to learn that she still was not at the right place. Once there, immediate help was rarely available – intake workers usually scheduled future appointments for home inspections or return visits to complete more paperwork. For months, exhausted relief workers labored long hours while exhausted victims waited outside in slow-moving lines. The atmosphere deteriorated as waiting periods

Plate 7.2 Waiting in the long lines, often in the rain, in order to receive supplies and apply for assistance was especially difficult for those with small children
Source: Charles Trainor, Jr./*Miami Herald*

lengthened and assistance declined. While the ill, heavily pregnant, or very frail were often invited inside to wait in air-conditioned comfort, most centers had no provision to help clients' children endure the long waits.

Interviews with Andrew's victims and workers confirmed our on-site observations that the tension level was high at many relief centers, often reflecting cross-cutting patterns of race, class, and gender. Relief workers, primarily White and middle class, typically came to South Florida from distant regions and had little, if any, experience working with culturally diverse clients. Many had been called from unrelated jobs – such as the Internal Revenue agents who became FEMA intake workers – and lacked any social services training. While many relief workers were patient and understanding, others were quick to judge poor and/or ethnic minorities as less deserving than victims who looked and acted more like themselves. We overheard workers' derogatory remarks about poor women's lack of English skills, large families, partners, or personal appearance – prejudices that negatively impacted service delivery. As one African-American woman said, "They hear you, but they don't *hear* you."

One legal aid worker noted that recent immigrants from countries with a legacy of political repression, such as Guatemala and El Salvador, were reluctant to seek help. Undocumented migrants were intimidated when uniformed immigration officers were deployed to distribute water and food immediately after the storm. Despite the large numbers of Spanish and Creole-speaking victims, translators were in short supply during the first few weeks. Clearly, agencies from federal to local were unprepared to deal with the multicultural diversity of South Florida (Phillips, Garza and Neal 1994).

After answering the FEMA worker's endless questions and then waiting for weeks, Pat was glad to have received anything to cover her household losses. At one point she was asked to produce three papers documenting her address at the time of the storm. While Pat was fortunate enough to have them, she told of a friend who had lost everything and was having a terrible time qualifying for help. Women applying for FEMA trailers were sometimes needlessly asked if they were married to the partners they were living with, an insult not lost on many. One migrant worker from Guatemala translated the question as, "basically what [they're] saying is, you know, 'Are you a slut living with this guy?'"

Case workers also expressed frustration with the process, complaining of being provided with inequitable, and seemingly inconsistent, screening criteria. After trying for weeks to get repair help for a family without insurance, one caseworker protested, "These people have bent over backwards, I mean they've signed until their arms were cramped . . . we've got three-inch folders; we've got Releases of Confidential Information, and we still aren't one step further in getting their home repaired." Another added, "You see the need, you know the resources are there, but you can't seem to cut through to get them."

Hard-pressed and over-worked FEMA, SBA, and Red Cross home inspectors often missed appointments, arrived late, made only cursory inspections, and left quickly. One of Pat's neighbors described the inspector who finally came to

assess her damage and resources as being White, frightened, and in a hurry. "The guy who came to my house – he didn't stay there ten minutes . . . That man, he was just shakin', and I says, 'Sir, are you alright?'" According to our informants, the inspectors often made mistakes when recording the facts about a claimant's losses, further impeding the process.

Direct service providers repeatedly mentioned to us that low-income single mothers were among those having the hardest time. One reason was the extent to which public housing was destroyed and the slow pace at which it was repaired or rebuilt. About two years after the storm approximately 20 per cent of the county's public housing remained unrepaired (Metro Dade Housing and Urban Development 1994). The delay, officials explained, was due to the slow release of public funds, as well as a reliance on private funding for much of the rebuilding. There was also speculation that some officials were hoping that, by delaying or thwarting the release of funds, the projects might be relocated outside their communities. In the meantime, families on public assistance spent months, even years, living in tents, trailers, and damaged apartments. When we conducted our focus group with Pat and her neighbors a year and a half after Andrew, they were still living in apartments with peeling plaster, mildew, broken cupboards, and kitchen appliances rusted beyond use. The repairs at Garden Grove were progressing very slowly, with each family being temporarily relocated to another unit while their own was repaired. Fewer than half of the apartments had been restored and the former daycare center was still being used to store construction supplies.

The women voiced concern about the effects of these disruptions and delays on their children. They described listless toddlers who didn't want to play and schoolchildren who couldn't concentrate on their homework. (For information about effects on the emotional health of children after Andrew, see Tasker 1993; Loudner 1992; LaGreca *et al.* 1996; Jones *et al.* 1993.) Formerly healthy children now had respiratory infections, stomach problems, allergies, and asthma and pervasive nervousness, especially on windy nights. Pat worried that the frustrated mother next door might be beating her toddler who had begun to wet his bed, a concern she relayed to the Health and Rehabilitative Services mental health team canvassing the area. Teenagers in Garden Grove were at a loose end for months, since virtually all recreational and entertainment facilities were destroyed. Even teenagers with a little money had no place to spend it – no music stores, video arcades, pizza shops, movie theaters. The women praised Lion's Club men who recently fixed the basketball court and the two Florida City police officers who were running an afternoon baseball team.

While focusing on their children's needs, it was clear that several of the women were ill. When pressed, they complained of headaches, vision problems, and sore throats attributed to living in damp apartments and a neighborhood still piled high with debris. Because of their heavy responsibilities, women are likely to be exceptionally overworked and emotionally stressed, making it essen-