

A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

The voices of women

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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.

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(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