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## **Gulf Oil Drilling Disaster: Gendered Layers of Impact**

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The Deepwater Horizon Oil Drilling Disaster of April 20, 2010 (the “BP Oil Spill”) is, as the news sometimes tells us, causing grave damage to the waterways and shores, marshlands and bayous of the Gulf of Mexico. Far more hidden is the devastation wrought on the women in scores of coastal communities.

My research and investigations in the Gulf region indicate that while all were affected, the women of the coast experienced differential impacts and unique issues during the disaster and in its aftermath. In this regard, the Gulf disaster fits in with the experiences of disasters worldwide, in which, across the board, women are disproportionately affected.

In the case of the Deepwater Horizon incident, women’s experiences were different from men in four main areas: 1) Care-taking and health; 2) Economic health; 3) Abuse in the home 4) Family stability. In many ways, women were required to take on new family responsibilities in the wake of the Gulf disaster. From a gender perspective, these are many lessons to bring forward.  
Challenged with Family Health and Welfare

In the aftermath of the disaster, people reported many health concerns: respiratory issues, digestive problems, skin reactions and other conditions. With these new health issues on the rise, women’s care-taking experienced a corresponding increase. As is typical in many families, women in the Gulf took on the role of caregiver when husbands, children or other family members became sick.

Furthermore, women faced risk to their own health, especially because of differential effects on reproductive health, as is frequently true in situations of environmental exposure. Veteran toxicologist Dr. William Sawyer, in his analysis of the risks resulting from toxic exposures arising from the Gulf Oil Drilling Disaster, pointed to Toluene and aromatic hydrocarbons as risks for women because they are known to cause spontaneous abortions and severe birth defects in humans and other mammals.

Mental health issues increased, and women reported having to be the pillars of stability and leadership in the family so that members could continue to function.

In addition, women became the spokespersons for families that needed to share their stories and advocate for justice. Recovery workers – most of those who were hired were male -- had to sign contracts saying that they wouldn’t “speak out” about their experiences as part of clean-up crews or other parts of the recovery, leaving the women to carry community voices.

Reliance on public assistance increased significantly in the region due to the disaster. Women were left responsible for accessing public assistance -- whether it's because women are viewed as being in charge of household matters, or because of gender based "pride" differentials. As Mary McCall of Coden, Alabama, shared with me, "And then I'm trying to help fishermen without jobs. I would get in line to get groceries, but them -- being men -- they didn't want to do that. They didn't want to say 'I'm going to stand in line for them to give me groceries'; I did it for (the men)."

#### Economic Access and Opportunities Shunted

Women's access to economic opportunities was limited and their experiences in the workplace were compromised because of the Deepwater Horizon incident. The gender of workers in the affected region influenced the degree of economic devastation, the ability to find new work, the percentage of compensation for loss of work in the claims process and experiences in the recovery process.

disasters – whether "natural" or "human-made" -- impact heavily on women

Jobs that women occupied before the disaster were more vulnerable to being obliterated. Oyster shuckers, crab pickers and chambermaids who I interviewed in my investigations were predominantly women, and they lost their employment. Some boat owners were able to gain revenue from being a part of the "Vessels of Opportunity" program that utilized boats in the clean up, and hotels continued to operate even when occupancy was low. But, employees on the lower rungs of the employment ladder – especially women -- suffered the greatest impact to their earning ability.

Many of the recovery jobs involved manual labor, and women were excluded from these opportunities. At one worksite, managers reported that out of the 300 workers, only 10 were women. Women reported being trained and then not being hired when mass recruitment of crews took place. Several women reported their concerns and were only hired after the NAACP called contractors expressing concern for discriminatory hiring practices. Clearly, the Department of Labor needs to increase oversight in ensuring that contractors do not discriminate based on gender.

In addition, many women reported numerous accounts of workplace sexual harassment by both co-workers and supervisors on various clean-up operation sites. Contractors must adopt zero-tolerance policies on sexual harassment in the workplace.

Women were also under-represented in the contracts awarded in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon Incident. An analysis of BP Supplier/Contractor Diversity data shows that a total of \$181.4 million in small business contracts was awarded; women-owned businesses received only \$4.9 million in contracts, less than three percent of the total. In the future, agencies offering contracts must be intentional about outreach to women owned-businesses.

#### Violence and Abuse At Home Escalated

Domestic violence increased significantly in the aftermath of the oil drilling disaster. For example, Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana had 32 reported cases of domestic violence in the first quarter of 2010; in the second quarter of 2010, when the oil spill began, the number of reported cases more than doubled, to 68. In her article, *Collateral Disaster: Domestic Violence Up After Oil Spill*, Jenny Inglee reports that Mayor Stan Wright of Bayou La Batre, Alabama, said that domestic violence had risen by 320 percent since the Gulf oil spill began. “There has been a 110 percent increase in daily calls and complaints to the local police department,” Inglee wrote.

Danny Patterson, of Mobile, AL with the South Alabama Community Foundation and Advisor to the Gulf Coast Fund, shared another situation during my interview with him: “One woman came to me. She said her husband would go out and sit in his truck all-day, gazing at the water. At the end of the day, he would start the beating again. She didn’t know what to do and where to go for help. There is an undercurrent that no one sees or knows about and help is needed. We need to put resources on this. In some communities there is a culture where you don’t even speak about issues like this.”

#### Carrying Extra Burdens

From the deaths of spouses to homelessness, women in the Gulf region faced additional challenges. The 11 oil rig workers killed on the Deepwater Horizon left eight women widowed with children; one woman, Michelle Jones, widow of Gordon Jones, was eight months pregnant when the oil rig explosion took her husband’s life.

#### Time for the US to look closely at the Gulf region

Reports indicate that marital and partner discord and divorce are on the rise in the wake of the disaster. Divided families have left many women and children struggling, especially in situations where the husband was the only skilled laborer and principal breadwinner.

Homelessness increased dramatically in some areas of the Gulf after the disaster. “In 2009, according to school districts and nonprofit organizations who keep records, 400 homeless children were in the system in Okaloosa County. In 2010, those numbers increased to 1033 homeless children and this increase was attributed to the Gulf Oil Disaster, as documented in intake data” according to Lenore Folkes of Opportunity, Inc. in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

Folkes described one case that shows the intersecting and layered needs that hit communities in the Gulf region: “A single mom, with an 18 month old child, came to us after she became pregnant again. She left her boyfriend because when she got pregnant the second time, her partner became increasingly frustrated because he had lost his job due to the oil spill. He was stressed out because he feared that they couldn’t manage to feed another person. His anger reached the point where he began to beat her because he was so worried that he couldn’t take on the extra responsibility. So she had no health insurance and a baby on the way.... Plus she was not in an employable situation. She had been working as a waitress lifting heavy trays, but she couldn’t continue keep up. So they asked her to leave.”

#### Learning about Gender from Deepwater

Only a few groups in the region had the mandate to address gender justice, such as Coastal Women for Change, Women's Health and Justice Initiative, and Women with a Vision. These organizations have minimal resources, and the disaster not only caused them to experience a loss of revenue, but the demand for services increased and their capacity to deliver plummeted.

In times of disaster, more resources need to be directed toward community-based organizations that serve as the glue for fractured communities. In times of disaster, women's organizations and family service programs need to be able to engage in preventative services to address the increase in stress and the inevitable increase in alcoholism, domestic violence and related concerns.

We know from international research that disasters – whether “natural” or “human-made” -- impact heavily on women; now is the time for the United States to look closely at the Gulf region and learn to better manage the gendered ways in which an eco-disaster affects women.