

*Voices of Solidarity:*  
**International Women Activists  
Share their Perspective on the Katrina Disaster**

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*“I have learned from our own experience in the aftermath of the tsunami that it is easier to deal with material assistance than the long term scars and processes of grieving and healing... and this type of assistance is even more inaccessible if you are poor or marginalized.”*

*–Sunila Abeysekera, Sri Lankan Activist*

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**L**ike most of you, Urgent Action Fund<sup>1</sup> is eager to be helpful in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Watching the tragedy unfold on the news we see striking similarities to UAF’s work in support of women in conflict and crisis areas outside the U.S., especially following the tsunami disaster last year.

We contacted UAF board members, advisors and colleagues – most of whom live or work in conflict zones – for their perspective on the Katrina crisis and an appropriate UAF response. From these discussions has emerged the following strategic brief on initial considerations for a grounded, gender-balanced response to this complex – and long-term – recovery process.

*Key priorities for women activists who are engaged in the response and recovery process include:*

- The need to ensure that there is a human rights framework and a gender perspective firmly embedded at all stages of the response, and among all actors.
- Civil society’s – and in particular women’s – participation in policy decisions about relief delivery and reconstruction (including resource allocation) is fundamental.
- Nongovernmental groups and women activists will need to reorganize and re-form as quickly as possible. However, they will have lost much of their personal assets and will be suffering from their own trauma. Many will be caring for family members and friends who are also struggling to come to terms with their loss. These activists need solidarity *and* financial support to

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<sup>1</sup> Urgent Action Fund is an activist-based international women’s human rights funder that provides rapid response grants to support unanticipated and time-urgent interventions by women human rights defenders working in violent conflict or crisis situations. UAF grants also support potentially precedent-setting legal or legislative action and enhance the security and wellbeing of women activists. Grounded in its grantmaking experience, UAF’s Research and Publications program produces books and reports that promote women’s security and participation in conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction. Urgent Action Fund also supported the establishment of its now independent sister organization, Urgent Action Fund-Africa, located in Nairobi, Kenya. For more information please visit [www.urgentactionfund.org](http://www.urgentactionfund.org)

first address their personal priorities, so they then can do what they do best -- *act*.

- Access to information and communications technology will be critical and will help to determine who has voice and who does not.

- In many conflict and crisis situations we have seen international organizations become involved and, intentionally or not, take over relief management, monopolizing limited local resources and undermining the capacity of local groups who know the community and the culture much better. We need to strengthen the capacity of local groups and ensure that they are in the lead.

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## Detailed Support Issues and Ideas

**1. Working on all levels at once:** A critical lesson from UAF's own research<sup>2</sup> is that women activists will stop whatever they were doing before the crisis in order to address the immediate, humanitarian needs of their communities. As a result, their attention is diverted from the critical policy decisions that will determine their futures and those of their constituencies. It is vital that women activists are supported to work on all levels at the same time – i.e. from service provision to policy-making.

**2. Sustaining activism:** Women activists are notoriously reluctant to address their own needs and the trauma that they may have suffered during a crisis. It is critical that we reach out to activists to offer them, as groups and individuals, the kind of day-to-day personal support that they require to sustain themselves and their families. It may be appropriate to set up a special fund to provide this kind of support. Such support should be flexible and sensitive to how activists themselves define their needs and priorities. In addition, it will be particularly important to reach out to those who are marginalized from mainstream movements, either because of their identities, the issues they work on, or a combination of both. Although

it is not clear who these activists are in the case of the Katrina response, in other crises we have found that this might include women activists who are lesbian, bisexual or transgender, living with disabilities, HIV+, young or elderly activists, or those representing a minority ethnic group or religion.

**3. Regional support bases:** UAF has found that in a number of crises, women activists have needed safe, practical spaces within the region to gather together, rest, plan their responses, gain access to good communications and logistics systems, organize and get back to doing their work. We have already heard of local groups in receiving areas that are offering their facilities to displaced activists. Support should be made available for such regional emergency resource centers/bases – both in establishing new facilities and in assisting groups willing to expand their current operations to accommodate their activist colleagues.

**4. Access to information and communications technology:** Cell phones will be essential to those who have lost their landlines. Even those displaced women who have cell phones may not be able to pay for the added phone service

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Barry, *Rising Up in Response: Women's Rights Activism in Conflict*, Urgent Action Fund, 2005.

necessary to reconnect with colleagues and resume their work. Activists will have also lost their computers and basic operating materials – in the short term, they will need access to computers and the Internet, and in the medium-term, to replace their lost assets.

**5. Organizing, regrouping, networking:** In the immediate aftermath of crises the need to reconnect with each other is a priority. This means first physically finding missing activists and ensuring they are safe and well, and next by forming coalitions.

**6. Rapid gender-sensitive assessments and audits:** It is particularly important to get gender experts organized, into crisis areas, and reporting back on women's priorities, particularly from a human rights perspective rather than a very basic 'relief' mindset. Such experts can assess – and set a baseline for – how the response is being developed and implemented to ensure that it is incorporating the active participation of civil society members, and in particular women, into all decision-making processes. Follow-up gender audits should be conducted to review the response and ensure its appropriateness.

**7. Addressing violence against women:** Violence against women and children, including rape and battery, increases in post-crisis environments. Crisis response mechanisms to address this violence – which is often hidden – must be supported, including culturally and linguistically appropriate medical, psychological, social and legal services for survivors. In addition, there are a number of prevention measures that could be successfully supported. Awareness and outreach in particular should take into consideration that in crises some groups are often considered less likely to suffer violence, and as a result are made much more vulnerable because they are

*de facto* 'hidden' from support, for example: older women, women with disabilities, very young children, HIV+ women (as well as men and boys), all of whom are much less likely to report violence or seek help.

**8. Attention to conditions for displaced persons:** Attention will tend to be over-focused on wherever the media directs us, rather than the places where the most people will need help. Significant issues that may be overlooked include the need to ensure the safety and well-being of large groups of people forced together over a long period of time, shelter and relief provisions should be gender-sensitive and appropriate, and the need for access to reproductive health care. In particular, *access to information* will be vital. This will include a large range of information about rights to property, entitlement to relief and benefits, re-establishing identity for so many who have lost their documents – or for those who may have been living outside of the 'system', such as undocumented immigrants or the homeless. Families who are seeking missing members, who may be presumed dead, may find their trauma and uncertainty exacerbated by the possibility that they will not be able to regain their property or make insurance claims. Finally, the process of recovery and return of mortal remains, particularly in crises with a large loss of life, can often be handled without the sensitivity and care necessary for grieving families.

**9. Emerging activists:** In crises throughout the world, there is a striking and powerful phenomenon that occurs as ordinary women begin to respond in their own ways to the relief and recovery process – becoming activists in their own right. It will be important to identify these emerging activists and provide them support as well as link them into existing networks. There will also be a need for new groups to be formed to deal with the longer-term response.

**10. The long term:** In the aftermath of the tsunami, there was a cry from activists that donors continue to fund the *programs they had already been running* rather than just the disaster response. In the case of the Katrina crisis, it is important to recognize that the response requires a significant increase in support funds – not just for the new relief needs, but to re-establish the critical support systems that NGOs had been providing on a daily basis. These are *new funding needs* – they must not be shifted from existing pools of money already designated for women’s groups throughout the country. It is often the case that in international disasters, large amounts of money (initially) are poured into the response – but almost always to the detriment of ongoing or upcoming needs that are perceived as suddenly less important.

**11. Support to local NGOs:** A significant, ongoing problem with the tsunami response has been that far too much money was given to the large international NGOs, rather than local NGOs. These agencies – with the best of intentions – were forced to spend out budgets far too quickly, which meant that they cut corners and in some cases disregarded the basics of good programming. In the coming years when these funds will be equally, if not more, critical for both the smaller, local NGOs as well as these larger international NGOs, there will be nothing left. A related constraint will be that donors may prefer to grant to the larger, national NGOs, rather than locally based groups because they trust their accounting capacity, and they need to move large amounts of money quickly. One possible answer to this dilemma may be to establish or use existing women’s umbrella funds – groups that can take on the larger donations, then get

them out quickly to the smaller local NGOs. Women’s funds in the U.S. are an excellent receptacle for this<sup>3</sup>.

**12. Linking activists across borders.** It may be helpful to offer women’s expertise from other crisis situations to U.S. activists (and donors) to advise the response. UAF has supported this type of exchange by bringing together activists from various sides of a conflict or from different parts of the world. In these cases, they have found tremendous solidarity and inspiration from one another. These bonds further strengthen the sustainability of the work undertaken. The Katrina crisis may offer an important opportunity to once again show women activists’ strength and capacity to respond. As one activist stated when she heard this idea, “This is a great moment to bring us all together.”

*In facing one of the most severe humanitarian crises in U.S. history, Urgent Action Fund believes that U.S. donors and policy makers can benefit from the experience and wisdom of women around the world who have confronted disasters of unimaginable proportions with courage, skill, and tenacity. We offer their words to you in solidarity and with the hope that the lessons they share will contribute to a response to this crisis that is not only compassionate but also inclusive of the voices, talents, and perspectives of the women and girls who are already working to heal and rebuild the U.S. Gulf Coast.*

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<sup>3</sup> For example the Ms. Foundation has initiated the Katrina Women’s Response Fund, which can be accessed through their website at: [www.ms.foundation.org](http://www.ms.foundation.org) . The Women’s Funding Network website, [www.wfnet.org](http://www.wfnet.org), also includes a list of local or regional women’s funds responding to the crisis.