

FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD

“But She Is a Woman and This Is a Man’s Job”: Lessons for Participatory Research and Participatory Recovery

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“If ‘Anne’ thinks she is going to get the position of director of the Interfaith Recovery just because she has been doing it for the last six weeks, she is mistaken. She is not a professional and she does not have the education. As a board member I can’t support her.” This was spoken not at a board meeting but along the banks of a river. Dick was fishing for salmon (and having no luck). Kris was doing a different kind of fishing — and they were biting. The ‘bait’ had been taken and the fight was to begin. . . . “They have just left us black folks out,” said ‘Beatrice’ about the white interfaith recovery organization. ‘Beatrice’ and women from the black community told Kris, “Can you help us?” Kris who carries a community organizing tackle box with everything in it said. . .

The leadership roles of women in formal disaster response organizations like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), American Red Cross (ARC), United Way, and the religious community are not well documented or understood. Even less is known or appreciated about the leadership of local, non-professional, and historically-vulnerable women in disasters. How do recovery efforts enable or disable these grass-roots women as they seek to serve their communities? What are the implications for the overall recovery when recovery organizations remove local residents from rebuilding communities?

Disasters provide a unique opportunity for understanding and promoting local capacity-building. Some disaster response agencies are beginning to understand that “there are women out there” who bring valuable resources, skills, insights, and knowledge to the recovery process. Our experience compels us to agree that women are ideal for the demanding and complex tasks of

recovery. In this paper, we explore the assets local women bring to disaster recovery and the ways in which they can be further enabled despite norms that marginalize women, particularly women of color.

'Anne' did not have the education the board member was looking for. There were some other contenders with Master's degrees. But in our professional opinion, 'Anne' was the woman for the job; in our minds she did have the 'education' and skills necessary to direct a complex long-term disaster recovery:

"Well, I have teenagers. I worked in a doctor's office — I set up meetings and conferences for him. I am very active in my church. I know these people, they are my neighbors and friends. I almost lost my home, too."

She brought to the recovery what we believe are the necessary ingredients for doing the job well: deep caring for the people; the trust of a community that did not take well to strangers or "officials"; the street (in this case dirt road) smarts to run the system; and, finally, incredible intuition. She knew how to learn and that she needed to learn. She had two advocates. All that was left to do was to "land the board."

'Beatrice' had little or no "education," but she could run the system, knew the "art of the possible" and no one was going to stop her. These were her people! 'Beatrice' had the organization (but you could not find it on paper), a little money, the trust of the community, and an advocate with a lot of knowledge.

The Sources of Our Perspectives and Insights

While women lead more formal organizations and agencies like the American Red Cross and the United Way, much remains to be learned about the local level. Our disaster advocacy recovery work spans 25 years (Kris) and 15 years (Dick) across many different regions and hazards. We see some common denominators in the contributions of women, obstacles to their participation, and interventions needed that enable local women to exercise leadership. We focus on the grass-roots level, the source of our forty-years of combined experientially-based remarks which arise from interactions with community based organizations (CBOs) like the Big Lake Recovery Center, Alaska; the Cape Mendocino Earthquake Recovery Group, California; and TRAC (Terrebonne Readiness Action Committee) in Louisiana.

In our experience, we would estimate that women comprise about half of the directors of local community-based recovery groups and that the vast majority of the care managers and outreach workers are women. The larger and more formal the recovery organization is in terms of funding, geographic area, and scope, the less likely it is to have a woman as the director. Only a small percentage of the women who lead these CBOs have college degrees: the majority hold a

high school diploma or less. Few in our experience are trained in the social sciences, psychology, or business. However, our experience leads us to believe that "formal knowledge" — at the expense of other skills and attitudes — can be detrimental to local disaster recovery organizations. Indeed, we have seen women lead some of the nation's most effective recovery organizations, but have even more frequently seen their contributions thwarted.

Skills and Insights Women Bring to Disaster Recovery

To a significant degree, "natural" or human-caused disasters are, for vulnerable people, "everyday life writ large." Everyday life for the most economically marginalized represents a string of disasters that women prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against — including sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, economic deprivation, and health crises. Disaster response is their everyday vocational reality, and they respond creatively. Most importantly, they survive.

Most of the women we have worked with come from working-class backgrounds, and all have been homemakers. Not just working-class, they come from modest to poor circumstances. Their homemaking experience, often overlooked or trivialized by the larger society, give these women the skills, values, insights, and attributes necessary for long-term, community-based, and effective organizing.

'Carol' was a very shy housewife with almost no experience outside the home and school her children attended. Her pastor thought, "It might be good for her to get out a little and help with the recovery." Well, 'Carol' did, and she became one of the most effective mental health outreach workers of the recovery. She knew her people, and they knew her.

Household and family caregiving, often with limited resources and combined with employment, means that these women must be frugal and effective time-managers as well as creative and collaborative networkers. Experience within families enhances their sensitivity to human needs and feelings and also means that they must make difficult decisions, know how to say no, and do more with less. They seem to understand the holistic, systemic, and community-wide nature of disasters, sensing the root causes of vulnerability. They show a keen interest in local capacity-building, and often develop creative, ecologically-sound programs.

Women bring additional skills that enhance abilities to direct recovery efforts. The most basic and, we believe, the most important survival resource women (or men) bring to a recovery effort is LOCAL KNOWLEDGE. Knowledge of the people, the issues, and the historical and political contexts

gives these women advantages over even the best-trained, outside professional. Combined with local trust and respect, their knowledge outweighs all other resources. We have seen that women are usually the first to begin to offer aid to survivors and begin the early organizing process. They usually simply DO IT, by collecting resources, starting informal recovery centers, and providing food, shelter, emotional support, and childcare. Their localized knowledge is key because they know where things are, whom to go to, and how to gauge the effectiveness of the effort. They know when someone is "burning out" and who can go the distance, as well as which agencies are most flexible in a chaotic environment and which politicians are most responsive to their needs.

However, they may not see themselves as a key recovery resource:

"I've never done anything like this before. Where do I go for help?" 'Diane' asked Kris. "I can help you." "But you are leaving soon," said 'Diane'. "Well, there is the phone and fax and if necessary I can come back for a while."

'Diane' had a formal education, but not in anything closely related to disaster recovery, but she knew people. Her training was in the creative arts. She was a single parent and looking for a job. She knew the media and the political system of her area, and, like 'Anne,' 'Beatrice,' and 'Carol,' she cared, knew how to learn, and enjoyed the trust of other locals. As a consequence, she has run what must be the longest (six years) and most successful community-based recovery we have seen. This organization has repaired and rebuilt homes and developed a strong preparedness program and a mitigation project. All from a woman who "did not know how to do this."

Women who rise to leadership offer creative rather than traditional solutions which established organizations may resist. Grass-roots women seem less confined to "we have always done it this way" and more willing to take risks, to innovate, and to share power. Based on our observations, these women are more cooperative and collaborative than men are in similar positions, but they are not pushovers. They tend to be client- and community-centered rather than agency-centered and thus may seem unwilling (to outsiders) to "play the bureaucratic game." Nonetheless, their knowledge, experience, and skills should not be overlooked.

Many women, in our experience, seem to have an intuitive knowledge of the chaotic nature of disasters and seem more comfortable with the ambiguities of recovery. They see possibilities whereas others may see problems or see problems where others may see nothing. They are more likely to see the needs of children and the elderly and appear to be more comfortable with feelings—their own and others. Women seem to understand the "symbolic" nature of recovery and the importance of community ritual and symbols. They are the keepers of traditions and celebrations, and thus the providers of meaning

and hope. They not only survive, they sustain themselves, their families, and—given the opportunity—their communities.

Obstacles to Women's Leadership

"She can't do it." "She doesn't know how." "She is too busy."

"They will eat her up!"

"I can't do it." "I don't know how." "I am too busy." "They will eat me up!"

As things begin to "calm down" and get "more organized," and as agencies, organizations, and governments—local, regional, and/or national—enter the picture, the role of local women may diminish or even disappear. Some women may choose or need to go back to their regular caregiving. But in our experience they are often involuntarily replaced with men. Those who come together to organize the recovery—be they from the government, business, non-governmental organizations, or the religious community—are mostly men. Local women are usually not included in these meetings.²

Professional recovery experts may view the local women as the "victims" who need assistance. Such a belief sidelines the critical resources local women bring to the recovery process. Organizing groups tend to look for people with social service, business, or psychological degrees and experience. Outside organizations tend to prefer professionals or to not recognize the skills of non-professional women. Organizing groups generally do not value local knowledge, respect, and trust as resources; nor do they understand that "home-making" skills and experience provide strong backgrounds for directing a community-based disaster recovery.

When local non-professional women do become the directors of the recovery group they are often "over-controlled" by their board, and they will often be patronized and even resented by other "professional" agency staff of both sexes. Yet, their voices need to be heard in order for the reasons we have outlined above. Next, we offer some ideas on how to make that happen.

Enabling Women's Leadership in Disaster Recovery

"We really think 'Anne' is the right person for the job and here is why . . .," we said to each board member we could meet with.

"I think, 'Beatrice', I can help you find some funding and I think we can get you a VISTA³ position so you will have at least some income as you work on the recovery for the next year or so.

"Well, 'Carol,' you should be able to get a JTPA⁴ job position under the interfaith recovery. Here is how you do it—first . . ."

Women who are involved in long-term disaster recovery need advocates. On several occasions we have forcefully advocated for women leaders when organizations formalized. Typically, a board of directors wants someone with academic degrees and experience who knows the system, sometimes meaning the formal and informal "good-old-boy" system and sometimes meaning the federal aid delivery system. It is not unusual that a board excludes persons from the impacted community. Sometimes, in our haste to put formally educated "movers and shakers" on boards, we overlook the reason why these boards exist to aid local victims. Excluding those with localized expertise is patronizing at best and undoubtedly slows recovery, confuses victims about new procedures and personnel, and moves victims from active leadership to passive recipient status.

We need to remember that working-class families and homeowners intuitively understand their marginalized position. One consequence of being pushed repeatedly to the side is that a person doesn't feel confident or may need to be taught particular skills. Some women will benefit from some advice about how to be taken seriously in the formal agency and government world. Moving about in the formal work environment of bankers, politicians, and career recovery professionals can be intimidating. Usually, however, a little coaching about effective strategies to present issues, ideas, and concerns can go a long way. With a little success, confidence grows and a grass-roots leader can become a pivotal resource.

Conclusion

Our experience has taught us that women-professionals and non-professionals, formally and informally-play critically important roles in all aspects of disaster preparedness, response, and mitigation with all types of organizations and groups. We are particularly convinced that non-professional, historically vulnerable, and marginalized women play important informal and formal organizing and leadership roles. We believe we have identified some of the obstacles that get in the way of women and some ways to overcome these obstacles, but the women described here — as well as those of us who try to enable them — need more and better information. Taking a cue from our own experience, we encourage *participatory research* that will develop a better understanding of the roles, obstacles, and strategies for women in disaster recovery leadership. We offer our four decades of insights to encourage researchers to methodically and rigorously develop usable models for women's leadership at the grass-roots level in disaster situations.

'Anne,' 'Beatrice,' 'Carol,' and 'Diane' proved that had what it takes to direct a major complex long-term disaster recovery effort. Many of the women

we have had the honor to work with have gone on to make major contributions to disaster preparedness, recovery, and mitigation at the national level. We believe that our encouragement, coaching, and advocacy helped — but we know that THEY DID IT.

With an enabling perspective, organizations can hasten recovery and restore individual lives as well as communities. Toward that goal, we offer the following suggestions for *participatory recovery*:

- Upon arrival in a community, identify local, grass-roots leaders and ask their opinion. Validate their participation and efforts. Keep index cards on each person, because the person that is too busy right now might be free later — or be able to find someone from their community network.
- Identify obstacles that might prevent such leaders from participating, such as childcare, income, skills, or confidence. Find a mentor for them, or funding such as VISTA or JTPA.
- Include local leaders on boards or other positions of influence and leadership. If their voices remain quiet, solicit their opinions to make them feel included. Verbally reward good ideas to build confidence. Educate other board members about the value of local knowledge and community-based leadership.
- Emphasize diversity by including women of all locally-present racial and ethnic groups as well as single parents, elderly women, and women with disabilities. Work toward eliminating the phrase, "They fell through the cracks." Sometimes the most marginalized groups provide keen insights into the source of the cracks and how to prevent or fix them.
- Understand that experience can be as valuable as formal education. In combination with localized knowledge, and community relationships built on trust and established networks, recovery can speed up or be improved.
- Exercise patience if you are an outsider, bearing in mind that local persons have been besieged with not only the disaster also but federal forms, rules and regulations, and media. It takes time to build trust.

Notes

1. The authors see little evidence that national disaster response organizations are doing more than paying lip service to women's needs and abilities in disaster recovery, preparedness, and mitigation.

2. Local survivors and caregivers are generally not invited to these meetings. These meetings are more and more made up of combinations of local and national agency and organizations staff. Church World Service (CWS) is dedicated to enabling local survivors and caregivers control and direct their recovery. CWS regularly advocates with and for women, minorities, and other marginalized people and seeks to help them organize effective long-term recovery groups. The growth in the number of women clergy and women heads of CBOs is having some positive impact on the makeup of organizing groups and the boards of directors of local recovery groups. Women on a board of directors are no guarantee that there will be sensitivity to the abilities of local non-professional women.

3. Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) is a program of domestic volunteer service similar in nature to the Peace Corps.

4. The Job Partnership Training Act (JPTA) is a federal partnership program providing training and employment.