

HIGHLIGHTS

Newly Released Report

EVALUATION OF THE MS. FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN'S KATRINA WOMEN'S RESPONSE FUND

Ensuring the priorities of low-income women, women of color and their communities remain central to the relief, recovery and rebuilding process in the Gulf.

The Katrina Fund: “A model of how other foundations can respond to tragedies.”

Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) has released a new report that spotlights the important work of the of the Ms. Foundation for Women's Katrina Women's Response Fund and lauds the Foundation's unique and highly strategic funding approach— identifying the Katrina Fund as, “a model of how other foundations can respond, not only to natural disaster relief, but also to other tragedies borne out of unjust treatment of vulnerable populations.”

When Hurricane Katrina hit in August of 2005, the Ms. Foundation for Women (MFW) knew that an immediate response—one that took into account the specific needs of women in the region—was required. The Katrina Women's Response Fund (KWRF) was created to provide strategic support that would not only meet the immediate needs of women of color and low-income women in the Gulf Coast, but also ensure that their leadership and priorities remain central in both short and long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts.

With support from the Kellogg Foundation, whose grant of \$1,184,039 made it the single largest funder of the Katrina Fund, in 2006 MFW and its partner on this project, the Women's Funding Network (WFN), were able to employ a strategic “re-granting” process – 47 Katrina Fund grants, totaling \$1,074,145, were given directly to a variety of local, regional, and national organizations that work on issues affecting women, children and families, and to promote the grassroots leadership of women of color, advocacy and research, traditional and non-traditional job training, and supportive services.



Photo credit: Diane Greene Lent

From the beginning, MFW and WFN knew that it would be crucial to evaluate the impact and efficacy of the Katrina Fund grants, and to document and disseminate the lessons learned from this effort. SPR's report, released in December 2006, highlights the critical role the Katrina Women's Response Fund has played in:

- Exposing the depth of inequality due to race, economic means and gender—and the intersection of these inequalities

- Ensuring that the perspectives of low-income women of color are central to policy decisions about relief, recovery, and rebuilding.

Further, the report’s authors found that the short and intermediate outcomes arising from Katrina Fund grants are making a real difference—not least of all because of their strong focus on building the strength and leadership of women. The report concludes that:

“...the Katrina Fund has not only made tremendous progress in ensuring that issues affecting women and their families continue to be front and center in the recovery and rebuilding process; the Fund has also directly addressed deep fissures of social injustices that will likely remain long after levees, bridges, roads and homes are rebuilt.”

The Fund’s Strategic Approach

The relatively small size (just over \$1.2 million) of the KWRF, as compared to other sources of public and private funding in the region necessitated that MFW embrace an exceptionally strategic approach to maximize its investments. To that end, the Katrina Fund invested heavily in areas where they saw gaps and potential for being effective, including aid to affected nonprofit organizations and in physical and mental health, social, and job training services.

With the goal of ensuring that the priorities of low-income women, women of color and their communities remain central to the Hurricane Katrina relief, recovery and rebuilding process always at its core, the Fund focused its energies on:

- Providing direct response to low-income women evacuees’ immediate needs;
- Rebuilding the infrastructure of women’s organizations and other social change organizations that were directly affected by the Hurricane and flooding;
- Facilitating the participation of women in local and regional policy making structures.

Further, all KWRF grants paid special attention to assisting vulnerable populations, such as single mothers, traumatized children, disabled citizens, low-income residents, immigrants, domestic violence victims, etc.

In addition to grantmaking, MFW and several women’s funds adopted a proactive and “hands-on” approach to engaging grantees. For example, instead of issuing an RFP, MFW streamlined the proposal process to decrease the turnaround time and ease the paperwork burden on time-strapped organizational leaders consumed by disaster response activities. After an initial mapping process based on a series of site

MFW adopted a proactive and “hands-on” approach to engaging grantees.

visits, a team of MFW staff conducted phone interviews with 30 potential organizations and took extensive notes (in lieu of a formal grantee proposal) that became the basis for grant award recommendations. And once grantees had been selected, the Ms. Foundation offered grantees more than just dollars—the Foundation also took on a leadership, training, technical assistance, and convening role.

SPR concluded that this more engaged approach represented the most effective model for re-granting, finding that organizations such as MFW that worked actively to “organize philanthropy” on behalf of grantee organizations added significant impact to their grants. Elements of this hands-on approach on the part of key funders included:

- Convening stakeholders and fostering cross-agency collaboration
- Helping to link organizations to key power-brokers, including local and regional policymakers and elected officials;
- Influencing the lens or philosophy with which grantees approached their work;
- Proactively linking grantees to additional funding sources that could sustain and extend their work.

SPR’s study also highlights key findings related to providing rapid response in a disaster situation, funding strategically, re-granting models, promoting the voice of women of color leaders, and working with local and regional policymakers for systemic change. Their findings include:

- Funding strategies that relieved the burden of grant application were particularly important in a post-disaster situation because they provided grantees with more time to focus on meeting the needs of community members.
- Within the Gulf Coast region, the grant process – and progress towards project outcomes--often moved slower than expected because grantee staff were coping with their own personal losses.
- In a post-disaster situation, community needs are so great that direct service and advocacy have to go hand in hand.
- The most effective re-granting models were those where foundation staff played a hands on role in helping to build coalitions and shape service models.
- Women’s funds placed a necessary focus on the experiences and unique needs of women, particularly women of color.
- Although the capacity and interconnectedness of progressive women’s organizations in the Gulf Region has been strengthened, there is still a lot of work to be done.
- Funding groups that are not traditionally thought of as “women’s groups” (i.e. NAACP, immigrant rights groups) helped to both broaden the use of a gender lens and the perceived inclusiveness of the women’s movement.

- Leaders in the Gulf Coast region are “strapped” for time and for ideas and, thus, many are more open to community input and mutual problem solving than they were before the storm.
- Women’s Funds and philanthropy can use their power and “capital” to help create a space at the decision-making table and open up dialogue about the unique perspectives, needs, and leadership of women.

Central Findings

As listed above, the Katrina Women’s Response Fund’s strategic grantmaking approach played a key role in:

1) Helping expose the depth of inequality due to race, economic means, gender—and the intersection of these inequalities.

Established to become a driving force against re-enactments of social inequalities in the affected region, the Katrina Fund is rooted in a number of key strategies and principles to expose the depth of inequalities—many of which come from MFW’s and the women’s funding movement’s collective experience and expertise in promoting women’s leadership and economic self-sufficiency and in addressing gender inequalities.

SPR’s analysis finds that strategic grantmaking and direct action strategies designed to affect change at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels have allowed the Fund to make strides in disrupting the status quo that perpetuates racial and class inequalities. By integrating a gender lens into the Katrina relief and rebuilding effort, MFW and its funding partners have helped many grantee leaders internalize an understanding of why low-income women and women of color must play an integral part in any decision making process. Further, by promoting research and dissemination, as well as advocacy and community organizing, MFW and WFN have not only provided existing groups the support and credibility they need to grow; they have also been catalytic in helping *new* groups form and grow.



*Xochitl Bervera and Gina Womack, co-directors, The Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children
Photo credit: Leslie Parr, Loyola University, New Orleans, LA*

Support from the Katrina Fund has also aided grantees in raising a steady and persistent voice to call public attention to remedying pre-existing, structural inequalities. And more than simply exposing inequalities, these advocacy groups offer policy solutions that attempt to redefine the parameters for redevelopment at the *systems* level. Perhaps most important of all, however, is the Fund’s recognition that a crucial step towards finding solutions lies in promoting the leadership of low-income, women of color.

2) Ensuring that the perspectives of low-income women of color are central to policy decisions about relief, recovery, and rebuilding.

One unique and important aspect of the Katrina Women’s Response Fund has been its emphasis on promoting the perspectives of low-income women of color so that they are central to policy decisions about relief, recovery and rebuilding efforts. The engagement of low-income women and women of color has been a transformative process for some of the grantee organizations as well as for the women themselves. The Katrina Fund support has helped a number of grantee leaders to articulate more clearly the value of promoting the perspectives of women in general, and low-income women of color more specifically.

Fund leaders helped bring about this articulation by introducing both an intersectional analysis (i.e., addressing the ways in which gender, race and class intersect to create economic and social inequality) and a human rights framework to grantees; they also highlighted the importance of building alliances with diverse organizations (such as the NAACP and immigrant advocacy groups) and of providing support to women of color in positions of power so that they are better able to exercise and assert leadership. The Fund provided critical direct support for training programs so women of color would have the resources they need to find their voice and assume leadership in the public arena. In addition, MFW conducted “listening circles” and a bus tour in the region to surface the voices of women of color and to prioritize areas for funding

As a result of these efforts; women of color are increasingly taking action on their own behalf. As one grantee put it,

...Us going to Washington and learning how to implement powerful change is empowering change. [Before], we didn’t know how to do it, but [are] now able to merge with others who can make our voices heard. I know that numbers do matter and together we are a much bigger voice. For example, getting signatures can make a really big difference; we collected 951 signatures for one policy initiative. We have seen that our work did make a difference—and that is a big impact.

-- Sharon Hanshaw, Coastal Women for Change



Sharon Hanshaw outside her offices.
Photo credit: Leslie Parr, Loyola University, New Orleans, LA

Whether directly through promoting a gender lens or a human rights framework, organizing listening sessions with grantees, sponsoring research on the status of vulnerable populations, or supporting advocacy work and community organizing, the Katrina Fund has enabled MFW and other women’s funds to play a key leadership role along with other organizations to raise awareness of the continuing social injustices that are playing out in Katrina relief and rebuilding.

3) Building the strength and leadership of women across the Gulf Coast.

The Fund's focus on building the strength and leadership of women was instrumental to determining the key areas that received funding (e.g., public and affordable housing, job opportunities for women, childcare) and the specific approaches that grantees used to promote change.

SPR's conservative estimate is that over 50,000 people either directly received relief services or benefited from legal advocacy efforts by the Katrina Fund grantees. A smaller number received more intensive job training, housing, and childcare services.

Over 50,000 people have benefited from grantee efforts supported by the Fund.

The Katrina Fund contributed to realizing the following key goals¹:

- **Supporting community leadership and advocacy to ensure a more equitable rebuilding and recovery process.** The Katrina Fund invested heavily in community leadership and advocacy. Advocacy and community leadership has great potential to change lives because it creates a context for low-income women of color to lend their voices to policy discussions about how federal and state funds will be distributed. Towards this end, grantees engaged women in community forums and leadership development, gathered over 2500 signatures, and successfully advocated for policies that directly benefited over 25,000 people.
- **Ensuring that women and children have access to safe and affordable housing.** The lack of affordable and public housing in the Gulf Coast disproportionately affects poor women and single mothers, making it particularly difficult for them to return to the region or create a stable living environment for their children. Advocacy by Katrina Fund grantees resulted in an increase in the units of affordable housing by at least 630 units and increased dialogue and focus on the rights of renters and those that live in public housing. Grantees also worked to gut and repair hundreds of housing units and provided thousands of hours of legal consultation.
- **Promoting economic recovery by supporting job training programs for women.** Women have been affected by employment-sector shifts in the region that have replaced good paying jobs in the health and education sector with construction-trade work. Although most of the job training programs funded by the Katrina Fund are still in the preliminary stages, at least 149 women have received job training services thus far, and at least 48 women have transitioned to stable unsubsidized employment.
- **Increasing the availability of subsidized childcare so that women can return to work.** Access to quality affordable childcare is crucial to the long-term economic well-being of women and their families, as well as to the overall community. The Katrina Fund helped a key provider in Mississippi to

¹ All outcomes reported here are preliminary as most of the work of grantees is ongoing.

leverage money for rebuilding and to raise awareness among policy and decision makers about the importance of childcare to economic development and recovery. The Fund also helped to sustain a childcare referral service and provided women with full-time childcare so that they could participate in job search or job training.

- **Supporting mental and physical health services that are vital for women and children.** The impact of Hurricane Katrina on women and families (financial stress, displaced support systems, and unstable housing) has long-term implications for their mental and physical health. The Katrina Fund placed a priority on maintaining vital services for women by funding organizations that provide services for sexual assault, abortion and reproductive health, AIDS, and domestic violence. The fund also supported the creation of materials to help parents and teachers recognize and address the signs of trauma in children.
- **Providing operating funds to support organizational and program development.** The Katrina Fund provided organizations with flexible general operating funds that they used to hire staff, acquire land, plan and develop programs, participate in policy forums and discussions, build evaluation expertise and fundraise. Grantees reported that they were able to leverage Katrina Fund grants for an additional \$2,100,000 in funds.
- **Convening stakeholders in order to enhance infrastructure and promote collaboration.** Grantees took advantage of Katrina Fund dollars and convenings to nurture cross-agency coalitions (such as the Steps Coalition in Mississippi) and public private partnerships.

Recommendations

One of the overarching lessons emerging from this project is that the important work of rebuilding and healing the Gulf region is just beginning. Yet, a recent Foundation Center report on foundation funding for Gulf storms recovery revealed that the vast majority of funders who provided grants to the region in 2005/2006 do not anticipate providing any additional funding. The lack of broader philanthropic interest in funding long-term Gulf area recovery has implications for the region, for the grantees that the Katrina Fund supported, and for MFW and WFN's roles in sustaining support for rebuilding. The following are priorities for moving forward:

- Continue to fund advocacy and grassroots organizations in order to nurture the burgeoning—yet still fragile—grassroots nonprofit sector in the South.
- Continue to fund non-traditional job training, childcare, and affordable housing for women to strengthen the long-term economic health of the region. To the extent possible these services should be “bundled” to decrease barriers (i.e. transportation) low-income women face in accessing services.

- Fund research and media outreach to provide nonprofit advocacy groups with the information they need to hold policymakers accountable to their stated values.
- Support an intermediary or strategy center that can build the capacity of local organizing groups and help them to better coordinate their efforts.
- Direct future grant dollars to organizations in the Gulf region now that many evacuees have integrated into resettlement communities.



A Survivors Village is erected at the St. Bernard Project.
Photo credit: Diane Greene Lent

In sum, SPR's evaluation shows that the Katrina Fund has made great progress in ensuring that issues affecting women and their families continue to be front and center in the recovery and rebuilding process. There is, however, much work yet to be done in order to ensure that the women, children and families who have suffered so much have access to a more equitable and prosperous future.