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Women's Employment Falls More Than Men's In Wake of Hurricanes

IWPR Report Finds Deep Segregation in Gulf Coast Labor Market by Sex and Race

A new report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) finds that women in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region suffered from deep segregation in the labor market by gender and race, making them particularly vulnerable to the devastating effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In, *The Women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast: Multiple Disadvantages and Key Assets for Recovery, Part II. Gender, Race, and Class in the Labor Market*, part two in a two-part series, IWPR uses federal government data to examine the employment and earnings of women, particularly women of color, in the city of New Orleans and the metropolitan areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas hardest hit by the hurricanes.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in July of 2006 among returned evacuees was a low 4.2 percent, but among evacuees who had not returned to their homes, 23 percent were unemployed. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey confirms that the population in the New Orleans metro area has become more white, less Black, and higher income, as poorer people have been unable to return. Few single-mother families have returned. Since the hurricanes, not only has women's employment fallen more than men's in the New Orleans metro area, but men's wages have apparently increased and women's have fallen. The study also finds that large disparities existed between the types of jobs held by men and women and between white and Black workers, with women and people of color in the lowest paid jobs prior to the hurricanes in our three geographic areas.

The study's results show that for people in the Gulf Coast region, working was no insurance policy against poverty. In the city of New Orleans prior to the hurricanes, for example, 15.4 percent of working women lived below the poverty line, compared with 8.2 percent of working men in the city and with 8.7 percent and 6.3 percent of working women and men nationally. In the Biloxi-Gulfport-Pascagoula MSA, 12.6 percent of working women and 10.2 percent of working men lived in poverty. Work did not protect them from poverty.

Low-income women were unusually hard working and integral to the region's economy. In the city of New Orleans, 45.4 percent of poor women worked, and in Biloxi-Gulfport-Pascagoula 46.8 percent of poor women worked, compared with 41.4 percent of poor women nationally.

"Working poor women in this region, despite working harder than those in other parts of the country, were generally even more poorly compensated," remarked Avis Jones-DeWeever, an IWPR program area director and a report co-author. "More women than men have left the region after the storms. To attract them back, women must be offered better opportunities for good jobs along with child care and schools for their children."

The study finds shocking occupational segregation on the basis of sex. In examining the lowest and highest paid jobs for women and men in the region, the authors find few jobs in either category common to both women and men.

In addition, median earnings for men in their lowest paid occupations range from \$15,150 to \$23,500 annually in the city of New Orleans, compared with women's earnings of \$11,400 to \$20,000 in their lowest paid occupations. Median earnings among the highest paid jobs for men range from \$38,700 to \$130,000, compared with \$30,000 to \$63,000 for women.

The report finds labor market segregation based on race and ethnicity as well. Few of the largest occupations for women in the areas studied were common to both Black and white women or to both Hispanic and white women. White women worked as lawyers, postsecondary teachers, and waitresses, while Black women worked as maids, health aids, and cooks. In cases where white and Black women did have occupations in common, white women out earned Black women. For example, median earnings for white women working as secretaries and administrative assistants in New Orleans were \$9,000 higher than for Black women and median earnings for white women working as elementary and middle school teachers and registered nurses were \$6,400 and \$2,500 higher, respectively, than for Black women in those occupations.

“The region’s occupational segregation is deep-rooted. Women of color feel it the most because the disparities are drawn along both gender and race lines,” says Dr. Heidi Hartmann, IWPR President, and a report co-author. “You look at this picture and you see how hard it must be for these women and their children, struggling to make ends meet in the places they ended up and struggling to get back.”

IWPR’s paper outlines a number of policies to ensure that women’s experiences are accounted for in the rebuilding of the region, including enabling lower-income women to return home by offering and increasing affordable housing; restoring basic services, like schools, health facilities, and shelters; providing non-traditional job training for women; employing workforce development initiatives that will allow employers to offer decent wages; providing living wages; and providing child care for women and families. The paper also calls for increased inclusion of women and their needs in plans for rebuilding and for greater recruitment of women of the region into positions of leadership for the rebuilding.

“To attract workers to the region and to rebuild a thriving, sustainable economy, development efforts must address longstanding segregation and make decently paid jobs accessible to everyone regardless of their sex or race,” comments Dr. Barbara Gault, IWPR Vice President and Director of Research.

“One year later, after an infusion of untold amounts of resources and talent and uncountable hours of time from committed community leaders, the most difficult realities of life in South Mississippi, unmasked and augmented by Katrina, persist,” laments Melinda Harthcock of the Steps Coalition. “These difficulties tend to converge in the lives of women—and particularly so in the lives of women of color—who continue to provide the majority of the unceasing, unacknowledged, and low, under- or unpaid work of caring for family and community. In this time of rebuilding and re-imagining, where are the voices of these women and what is *their* vision for the region?”

The Institute for Women’s Policy Research conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family issues, health and safety, and women’s civic and political participation. IWPR’s new Briefing Paper can be found on its website at www.iwpr.org.

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