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edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

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An Interview with Shana Griffin

The Women of New Orleans After Katrina

By ELENA EVERETT

Shana Griffin is resident of New Orleans and organizer with INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance New Orleans. Shana grew up in the Iberville Housing Development and is completing a Masters Degree in Sociology at the University of New Orleans. She is currently working on the Women's Health and Justice Initiative, which is a coordinating with several organizations to open a Women's Health Clinic this September in the historic Treme district of New Orleans. For more information, email whji_info@yahoo.com.

There have been a lot analyses about race and class post-Katrina, how does your organizing philosophy differ and work to address women's issues?

I, and the women I work with try to organize from an intersectionality approach that includes an analysis of gender, race, class, citizenship status, sexuality, and a critique of privilege. We try to organize from an unfragmented approach, meaning we don't expect people to walk through the door and drop 3/4ths of

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themselves and come in as a just woman or just a black person. We don't exist as just women, we do have a race and we do have a class and ethnic background. It's important to look at things from an intersectionality - in the Gulf Coast there are reasons why things are unfolding the way they're unfolding.

On TV, immediately after Katrina and as things began to unfold in the city with the flood waters, most of the faces we saw were women - poor black women and their children and their families. If you took any urban area and gave it 24 hour notice to evacuate, it would be the same population, the same poor black women in the most vulnerable situations.

What do you see as unique challenges and issues women have been facing in the Gulf post-Katrina?

One of the biggest post-Katrina challenges is the complete absence of consideration or special provisions to meet the needs of women. So many studies related to disaster or times of war and conflict show that women are one of the most vulnerable populations. Violence against women increases as well as their responsibilities since they are generally the primary caregivers for the elderly and children. There's been an invisibility toward the needs of women of color in the Gulf Coast region.

To me, it's not enough to have a solid race and class analysis, because beyond those two, you also need a gender analysis. Because of the absence of the gender analysis of many agencies, organizations who identify as women of color organizations have to constantly fight to render ourselves visible and at the same time, we have to justify our existence in the work that we're trying to do.

New Orleans pre-Katrina population was more than half women and today when you look at the statistics around housing, healthcare, even incarceration - women and especially black women are much more vulnerable. In 2003 in Louisiana 80% of new HIV cases were black women - in public housing, the vast majority of tenants were women - I can go on and on - those who are most directly impacted are women when it comes to the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters.

How do you feel the initiative and clinic will work to address some of those issues?

The purpose of the clinic is to improve low-income and uninsured women of color's healthcare access and to promote an holistic and community-centered approach to primary to healthcare. At the same time we look at the oppression and violence that have impact on the health status of women and to improve those situations. It's more than providing healthcare services it's also about challenging the conditions that limit our access and our opportunities, such as poverty, racism, gender-based violence, imperialism, and war. We see it as more than just a clinic - we want it to also be an organizing center that can meet immediate needs while also working for racial, gender, economic, and

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environmental justice.

We see our clinic as a great opportunity to talk to people and discuss why these services and this approach is needed. We have the power to reinvent ourselves and create institutions that are equitable.

This interview is excerpted from "One Year After Katrina" a 98 page report released yesterday by Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch, available online at <http://www.reconstructionwatch.org/>

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