

Understanding the Impacts of Human Rights Violations in Puerto Rico through the Analysis of
Hurricane Maria: Identifying Puerto Rican Resistance

Honors Senior Thesis

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I dedicate this thesis to my friends and family for their support throughout my academics and this process, especially John.

I also dedicate this thesis to my Concentration in Human Services peer, Keith Yennie II, a beautiful person, and supportive classmate. Myself and everyone in my cohort miss him dearly and remember him fondly.

Finally, and most importantly, I dedicate this thesis to Puerto Ricans and the lives impacted by Hurricane Maria.

Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which Hurricane Maria revealed the impacts of human rights violations in Puerto Rico. Through the analysis of colonial history, austerity measures, and neoliberal ideologies, sources of vulnerability in Puerto Rico are identified and Hurricane Maria's impact is denaturalized. I identify local interventions based in grass roots and mutual aid models of solidarity that work to minimize Puerto Rican vulnerabilities. Interventions based in social work are also identified as possibilities to reduce vulnerabilities. Using a human rights framework, recommendations for policymaking are additionally presented.

Key Words

Sociology, Hurricane Maria, Human Services, Puerto Rico, Disaster, Human Rights, Social Work, Vulnerabilities, Grass Roots, Mutual Aid, Solidarity, Denaturalizing a disaster, Colonialism, Austerity, Neoliberalism, Diaspora

Personal Interest	5
Background	5
Colonial history and impacts	7
Austerity Politics	9
Vulnerability	11
Resilience and Resistance	13
Diaspora, Solidarity and Mutual Aid	14
Further Human Services Focus	16
Conclusion	18

Personal Interest

My interest in Puerto Rico in the context of Hurricane Maria began my senior year of high school when a girl named Annie joined my high school theatre group, as I got to know her, I learned that she moved to New York because of Hurricane Maria. Annie shared with me that if she had not moved away from the island, she would not have been able to graduate high school because her school had been destroyed and closed with no prospects of reopening. I struggled to understand how that was possible. Next, I learned about the SUNY and CUNY system effort to support Puerto Rico by sending students to the island to physically help rebuild homes. I was still in high school and devastated at the fact that I could not participate in this project. My freshman year of college, a year after hearing about the program and nearly two years after the hurricane made landfall, I traveled to Puerto Rico to rebuild a home. I spent two weeks in Orocovis, Puerto Rico working alongside a construction crew made up of residents. This thesis project has helped understand the conditions that made it necessary for Annie to move away from her home to finish her high school education, and why there was still a need to rebuild homes nearly two years after the hurricane's landfall.

Background

On the morning of September 20, 2017, hurricane Maria hit the island of Puerto Rico and caused historic devastation. Hurricane Maria was the second strongest documented hurricane to hit the island and came just two weeks after Hurricane Irma's highly destructive landfall (Benach et al., 2019). Hurricane Maria wrecked the island's running water system, phone lines, and electrical grid, and thousands of homes. The widespread devastation after Hurricane Maria was estimated to total at least 90 billion dollars (Benach et al., 2019). Puerto Rico has a history of

severe storms and devastation due to meteorological vulnerability based on the island's physical positioning. However, the level of devastation caused by Hurricane Maria is historically unmatched. Hurricane Maria made landfall on an island that has been experiencing structural vulnerabilities imposed largely by the United States of America (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). The degree of devastation caused by this natural disaster was not natural at all and was rather a result of the unnatural history of colonialism as well as political and economic conditions imposed by foreign actors. Understanding the social landscape on the island prior to the hurricane's landfall contextualizes the hurricane's impact on Puerto Rican society and individuals. Through this contextualization, the conditions yielding vulnerability are identified as the root cause of the disaster in Puerto Rico. By understanding the social roots of vulnerability, local actions taken by Puerto Ricans in the wake of the hurricane are positioned as politicized acts of resistance to the imposed conditions on the island. Manifestations of resistance may additionally be used to inform policies and human services interventions to institutionally transform the social landscape on the island.

Through the analysis of human rights violations and the historical contextualization of Puerto Rico's relationship to the Mainland United States, the hurricane's impact can be understood within the context of the structurally determined social sources of vulnerability. The analysis of vulnerabilities allows us to denaturalize the disaster and its impacts. Denaturalizing this disaster relates to the idea that the storm's impact was exacerbated by social conditions that increased the vulnerabilities of Puerto Ricans (Kleinenberg, 1999). Through the denaturalization of this disaster, the natural impacts of the storm are separated from the impacts Puerto Ricans faced as a result of the vulnerabilities imposed upon them.

Colonial history and impacts

Based on location, Puerto Rico is prone to natural events such as hurricanes. (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). This geographic fact is exacerbated by the colonial and post-colonial conditions on the island. Puerto Rico consistently faces public health disasters that are preventable, and elsewhere would not be catastrophic, due to the lack of self determination and implementation of programs to combat this. Colonial conditions increase the social and physical vulnerabilities of Puerto Rican residents and infrastructure. Colonialism and the colonial policies that currently exist are possibly the strongest social determinants of public health on the island (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). Within the island's recent history, the United States has imposed neoliberal ideologies upon Puerto Rico's government (Benach et al., 2019). Benach et al. (2019) explain specific manifestations of financial hardships brought on by colonial conditions. For example, Puerto Rico faces extremely high levels of poverty as compared to the United States. Although the United States and Puerto Rico have the same minimum wage, Puerto Ricans average a salary half of that in the United States, yet the cost of living in Puerto Rico is similar to the cost in the United States. Because of these interacting conditions, it is difficult for residents to escape poverty. In fact, in the five-year period prior to Hurricane Maria, nearly half of all adults and 57% of children were living below the island's poverty level. Overall, the Puerto Rican poverty level is more than twice as high as in the United States and Puerto Ricans face income inequality levels that are higher than any state in the United States (Benach et al., 2019). It is a human right, as determined by the United Nations in article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that individuals may live without poverty (United Nations, 1989). The economic conditions leading to widespread poverty on the island are human rights violations.

Puerto Rico is an unincorporated United States territory, which means that the island lacks self-determination, and Puerto Ricans lack full congressional representation. Additionally, Puerto Ricans are unable to determine their federal representation, as they are unable to vote for president. In all areas of governance, United States federal mandates override local policies and legislation (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). Article 21 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states the human right to take part in government through direct or elected representation (United Nations, 1989). The United States violates Puerto Rican human rights by limiting the opportunity for government participation and representation. Because of its status as a United States territory, Puerto Rico must annually appropriate funding to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In turn, Puerto Rico relies on FEMA's support and resources in the face of emergencies (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). However, the United States federal government was slow to respond to the disaster situation and provided inadequate support once response efforts finally began. These responses were accompanied by criticisms against the Puerto Rican government and its people regarding the island's amassed debt. When negotiating aid, the Trump administration reminded Puerto Rico's government that the island is severely indebted to the United States and perpetuated the rhetoric that Puerto Rico is excessively dependent on the United States federal government to solve its problems. Directly after the storm, many Puerto Ricans were heavily relying on receiving federal assistance in the form of physical and financial support from FEMA. It is within Puerto Ricans' human right to receive equal access to public services such as FEMA (United Nations, 1989). However, this human right was violated when FEMA failed to adequately respond and meet the needs of Puerto Ricans (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). Puerto Rican reliance on the United States federal government support is mainly a product of United States colonization. The relationship between Puerto Rico and the United

States is rooted in forced dependency, creating a longstanding context of structural vulnerability manifesting through weak social systems, decaying infrastructure, and deep poverty (Sou, 2021).

The Merchant Marine Act of 1920, which is commonly referred to as the Jones Act, states that imported goods must arrive to the island on United States ships with United States crew (Sou, 2021). Due to this policy, Puerto Rico is unable to engage in foreign trade, resulting in high priced goods that are often of lesser quality and less widely available as compared to options in the United States. As a result of extractionist United States policies, Puerto Rican resources such as crops are harvested and are exported through United States ports. This makes them unavailable for consumption within the island and contributes to limited self-determination. The extractionism of natural resources, such as food, is known as environmental colonialism. Since the 1950s, Puerto Rico has imported 85% of its goods from the United States to survive within environmental colonial policies (Sou, 2021). Directly after Hurricane Maria, the Jones Act prevented foreign aid from reaching Puerto Rico although foreign countries offered relief supplies. Ultimately, the Jones Act was waived for a total of ten days (Sou, 2021). The Jones Act is a prime example of a United States policy goal of extractionism of Puerto Rican resources. The Jones Act, along with other policies, create daily conditions that increase Puerto Rican vulnerability as well as vulnerability in the aftermath of a natural event. Puerto Rico does not receive appropriate support when the imposed systems are unable to function due to a natural event, furthering a disaster context.

Austerity Politics

A year after Hurricane Maria's landfall, in 2018, Puerto Rico's debt totaled 70 billion dollars and has since continued to increase. Prior to this disaster, in 2015, Puerto Rico's governor

announced that the island's debt is unpayable. Since 2015, interest on the debt continues to increase the owed total. Because of Puerto Rico's lack of sovereignty, the island is unable to access financial relief from the World Bank or regional funds (Benach et al., 2019). In response to the financial crisis, the United States has imposed increasing neoliberal austerity measures. Neoliberal austerity measures are policies based on the reduction of government spending through the promotion of privatization of physical infrastructure, social programs, and education systems (Benach et al., 2019). In 2016, Puerto Rico's finances became subject to the Fiscal Control Board (FCB). The FCB controls Puerto Rico's finances and is a proponent of neoliberal fiscal austerity measures. These measures came as a result of President Obama signing the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). PROMESA allows the FCB to have total control over the Puerto Rican governor's actions and can overrule decisions made by the Puerto Rican legislature. The FCB is made up of seven people who were nominated and elected by President Obama, and PROMESA was approved despite the opposition from Puerto Rico's people and government (Benach et al., 2019). This means that the United States has the last say on anything Puerto Rican officials propose. Through these specific measures, the United States government continues to demonstrate that Puerto Rico is subject to measures imposed by exterior actors; these measures are ultimately unfavorable to Puerto Rico's economic development and social welfare. The creation of the FCB and PROMESA violates the aforementioned human right to participate in government. Studies on social and public health show that the imposed austerity measures have caused a humanitarian crisis on the island. This humanitarian crisis, caused by human rights violations, manifests itself through increased excess death rates, increased school dropout rates, and decreasing labor market conditions (Benach et al., 2019).

Vulnerability

Although Puerto Rico has been impacted by similar storms in its history, the island had never experienced a hurricane in conjunction with the political, economic, and social conditions it was facing at the time prior to Maria's landfall. Despite meteorological advances that provided reliable information on the storm, Puerto Ricans and their government were unable to adequately prepare for the storm due to austerity measures (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018).

The "Risk Society" theoretical framework, established by sociologist Ulrich Beck, helps understand vulnerabilities and disasters (Beck & Ritter, 1992). Vulnerabilities are defined as the individual or collective characteristics that influence the capacity to "anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover" when exposed to a situation out of one's control (Straub, 2020, p. 1605). Within this framework, social systems and processes produce risk within society. These risks are most commonly created through decisions made by the government and justified in the name of advancement. In the case of Puerto Rico, the neoliberal political landscape creates risks in the name of United States profit and reducing Puerto Rico's debt to the United States. The Risk Society theory explains that risk is the product of the interaction between vulnerability and the natural event. Essentially, this theory works to denaturalize the disaster by identifying social systems as the root of vulnerability. Additionally, this theory explains that accountability for risk formation is often diffused. In the case of Puerto Rico, the United States government's accusatory rhetoric when aid was requested offers evidence of accountability diffusal. According to the theory, accountability diffusal is strongest in scenarios where the actors that impose risk are far removed from those that are impacted by the risk. Through this logic, the FCB imposes policies that increase Puerto Rican risk because they will not intimately feel the effects of those

risks. Society's trust in the institutions that create risk diminishes and society works to reclaim power within risk creation. According to Beck & Ritter (1992), this social reflectivity works to centralize the people within the politics of risk. Beck's theory explains that this collective political organizing is reactionary. However, given the colonial history of Puerto Rico, we may argue that this reactionary framework is not accurate within the social landscape of Puerto Rico. Additionally, Beck's theory explains that governments shape their response and recovery in the wake of natural disaster through the calculated potential for wealth production restoration. In the case of Hurricane Maria recovery, FEMA and other agencies worked only to restore Puerto Rico's economic viability and largely ignored all the other facets of society that require response work (Straub, 2020).

Identifying the sources of vulnerability is one of the first steps in understanding how social conditions must change to decrease vulnerability. One of the methods used to identify vulnerability is calculating the excess deaths after a disaster. Accurate accounts of excess deaths are crucial to public policy development that may create the necessary social conditions to minimize vulnerabilities. Calculating excess deaths is a nuanced process, prone to biases and inaccuracies which may prevent governments from understanding and acknowledging the full impact of a disaster. Cruz-Cano & Mead (2019) aim to understand the excess deaths caused by Hurricane Maria using a holistic method to calculate indirect deaths caused by the disaster. Cruz-Cano & Mead (2019) used data starting from 2008, which marks the start of the current Puerto Rican life expectancy trends. The death trends were further analyzed by categorizing the cause of death. The researchers found sex and age to be among the most consistent determinants of vulnerability. Excess death rates were highest among men aged 60 years or older. Additionally, most excess deaths were the result of heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, and septicemia (Cruz-

Cano & Mead, 2019). This information reveals that older men, and people with preexisting health conditions or disabilities, are more susceptible to health complication related deaths in the face of a disaster. These trends, and other patterns of social vulnerabilities, can be used to inform public policies. Future policies could be designed to reduce the impacts of future disasters by addressing conditions that are common sources of vulnerabilities.

Resilience and Resistance

Analyzing resilience narratives within the history of colonial conditions allows resilience to be reinterpreted as resistance. By understanding the power relations that have led to vulnerabilities Puerto Ricans face, we see how resilience is essential to survival on the island, and how it can shift into understanding resilience as a resistant act (Sou, 2021). Common narratives of disaster resilience solely focus on actors' responsive actions, which portray actors as merely coping and surviving in the wake of disaster (Beck & Ritter, 1992). These narratives limit the understanding of resilience and ignore actors' political agency through practicing resistance. In other words, disaster resilience is more than just short-term survival, resilience also generates patterns of long term, politically informed resistance; resistance works to address the roots of vulnerabilities (Sou, 2021). Sou (2021) analyzes Puerto Rican women's domestic work as a political act of resistance. In the wake of Hurricane Maria, many women started vegetable gardens to feed their families. This act defied the Puerto Rican import dependency on the United States and can be viewed as pro-independence and anti-colonial. Acts that created alternative ways of life demonstrated self-determination and resistance to American colonial domination. Politicizing every day, grassroots disaster responses allows these acts to be viewed as models for possible anti-colonial Puerto Rican life.

Sou (2021) analyzes grassroots work in the wake of Hurricane Maria to add complexity to the idea of resilience. We must understand vulnerability as a socially determined state that dictates the way a disaster will impact individuals and communities (Sou, 2021). Given this understanding, we are able to move away from the narrative that the natural event is the source of disaster. Through this perspective, vulnerability is understood as the root of the disaster. Therefore, necessary social conditions must be created to eliminate the vulnerabilities in society. Sou (2021) argues that deliberate acts of resilience add to Puerto Rican resistance against the conditions that weaken their island. This perspective explains that resistance is informed by the political conditions surrounding the actions. In turn, it reveals how grassroots work is anti-colonial in its aim to reduce Puerto Rican vulnerability. Overall, Puerto Rican displays of resistance combat human rights violations.

Within public policy making, the concept of resilience places the burden of social advancement on the people. This burden displaces the responsibility the government has in ensuring that it protects its people (Álvarez-Rosario, 2021). Through this thinking, public policy advancement is hindered because the impacted people are viewed as inherently resilient. Álvarez-Rosario (2021) calls for a movement based in social work to dismantle the oppressive public policies that are rooted in neoliberal politics. He proposes that social workers become involved in public policy formation regarding disaster preparedness to ensure that social interests are represented in this process.

Diaspora, Solidarity and Mutual Aid

Operating with an understanding of the impact of colonialism, Puerto Ricans have been engaging in grassroots and mutual aid work over the last century. The focus of this community

driven activism rejects the common idea that existing state infrastructures must be restored after disasters occur (Espinoza Vasquez, 2021). This rejection is fueled by the understanding that deficient existing state infrastructures created the vulnerabilities that led to the disaster in the first place. Alternatively, Puerto Rican activists have worked over the last century to build Alternative Sociotechnical Infrastructures (ASI) to reduce Puerto Rican vulnerabilities (Espinoza Vasquez, 2021). These efforts are based on seamful work to create an extensive, interconnected network of diasporic and locally based organizations, designed to combat misaligned state infrastructures that fail to meet community needs.

Mutual aid is a system of solidarity based in sharing physical and human resources to respond to situations of need and fill gaps in available resources (Archibald, 2007). Mutual aid is most needed in disaster situations where emergency management agencies fail to respond adequately to the present need (Stier & Goodman, 2007). Grassroots movements are based in local actors joining forces to organize efforts of mutual aid based solidarity (Vélez-Vélez & Villarrubia-Mendoza, 2018). The Puerto Rican diaspora, which is made up of many Puerto Ricans not presently living on the island, played an important role in the response and recovery efforts of the island. The Puerto Rican diaspora is extensive, as Puerto Rico's social conditions make leaving the island a desirable option. Mainly relying on social media networks, Puerto Ricans living in the diaspora were able to exhibit solidarity by amplifying local calls for relief and organizing support (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). Through these actions, the members of the Puerto Rican diaspora were able to make the humanitarian crisis more visible outside of the island and increase the level of available emergency response.

In the weeks following Hurricane Maria, grassroots organizations emerged, which were referred to as "Centros de Apoyo Mutuo" (CAM), this translates to Mutual Support Centers.

These centers were founded by residents in some of the areas most heavily impacted by Hurricane Maria and were supported by the diaspora (Vélez-Vélez & Villarrubia-Mendoza, 2020). The development of CAMs was more than simply reactive survival actions and was in actuality based in an understanding of the social roots conditions that led to the disaster's impact. This view of the grass roots action rejects the emergent phenomena, which portrays community resilience as an isolated, emergency reaction to a specific event. CAMs are formed when local residents know that structural responses to disaster will not adequately meet local needs. CAM organizer profiles include individuals involved in decolonial politics, social justice, and backgrounds in local activism. CAM organizers relied on mobilized solidarity and networks of reciprocity to best support their communities. CAM organizers recognized the impacts of decaying infrastructure, inadequate state responses, and marginalized communities as a source of disaster independent from the hurricane (Vélez-Vélez & Villarrubia-Mendoza, 2020).

Further Human Services Focus

Neoliberal politics and austerity measures, such as lack of investment in medical systems and infrastructure, create significant sources of vulnerability for elderly and disabled individuals (Engelman et al., 2022). The FCB and PROMESA consistently raise taxes in Puerto Rico and reduce access to public services. Many elderly Puerto Ricans who have disabilities rely on public services to fulfill their needs. As supported by statistics of excess death characteristics, most Hurricane Maria related deaths lie within the elderly population on the island (Cruz-Cano & Mead, 2019). As of 2016, almost half of all elderly Puerto Ricans reported at least one disability. Cutting access to public services potentially limits support for over half of elderly Puerto Ricans relying on these public resources. These conditions are in violation of Article 25 of the United

Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to a standard of living that permits access to medical care and necessary social services (United Nations, 1989).

Research shows that individuals with disabilities face an increased risk of adverse effects in the wake of disasters as compared to the general population; this risk is even greater when governmental support is absent or inadequate (Engelman et al., 2022). Puerto Ricans who are both elderly and disabled lie within an intersection of increased vulnerability. Looking towards government protection of such individuals, O'Brien (2011), offers a practical guide for social workers through the application of a disability rights framework. He suggests that social workers use their professional commitment to protecting marginalized groups and become involved in politics. Social workers should become involved in policy development and operate under the commitment to upholding disability rights. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities may be used as a guide for disability rights. The convention states that individuals with disabilities have the right to accessibility in the public sphere. Additionally, individuals with disabilities have the right to be involved in decision and policy making processes (United Nations, 2006). Social workers may use the declarations made in the convention to uphold the rights of individuals with disabilities and center their direct input within the process. In doing so, social workers become involved in large scale solutions to address Puerto Rican sources of vulnerability.

On a more local level, social workers have committed to facilitating and providing mental health services. Directly after Hurricane Maria, social workers conducted community surveys to identify individuals who needed mental health support. There are approximately 6,000 social workers on the island, who are employed at government and nonprofit agencies (Herrera, 2020). Social workers worked with mental health professionals to distribute emergency psychological

services (Lybarger, 2018). In the long term, social workers could collaborate with grassroots organizations to offer mental health resources for grass roots organizers and their communities.

Conclusion

Hurricane Maria's impacts were exacerbated by the social and political landscape on the island of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States imposes conditions that increase Puerto Rican vulnerability. Identifying sources of Puerto Rican vulnerability can minimize the impacts of future natural events and reduce disasters. Operating through a human services focus, disaster response organizers can work to reduce Puerto Rican sources of vulnerability by creating political action and supporting local organizations. Possible solutions lie in reducing the structural barriers that prevent grassroots organizations from best supporting their communities. Grassroots organizations play a key role in Puerto Rican success because they have unique knowledge and experience surrounding their communities' needs. Grassroots organizations' impact can be amplified when given targeted institutional support. For example, the government could invest in infrastructure that improves communication and transportation across the island. Infrastructure improvements are only possible when neoliberal policies are redesigned, positioning Puerto Rican human rights as a prioritized over United States profit. Social workers may use their professional focus to advocate for these rights. Additionally, grassroots movements may benefit from receiving support from social workers in the form of mental health services.

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