

Women's Experiences in the Civil Rights Movement

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If you ask someone to name a civil rights leader, the most common answer would be Martin Luther King, Jr. Many people have never heard the names of the women who worked publicly and behind the scenes of the movement. These women came from diverse backgrounds and had different experiences within the civil rights movement, however, they faced many of the same challenges in society and in civil rights organizations. Black women's experiences and roles in the civil rights movement were distinct from those of white women or Black men. This paper will argue that while Black and white women both faced sexism within the movement that influenced the roles they performed, Black women were more likely to engage in high-risk activities and their recruitment networks and motivations for involvement were different from white women.

Black women's involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s came out of a long tradition of Black women's organization and involvement in community work. The civil rights movement grew out of earlier traditions of the Black church and the politics of respectability.¹ Throughout the Progressive Era, Black and white women were at the forefronts of social reform and created voluntary associations.² Middle and upper-class Black women were at the forefront of these organizations, working to provide social safety nets for their communities and demonstrate the politics of respectability that they hoped would lead to increased racial equality. Black women's participation in community advancement and racial uplift was not new, as throughout American history they had "been involved in activities aimed at social change, empowerment, and a better quality of life for the community as well as for society".³ Therefore,

¹ Tanisha Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress," *Journal of Southern History*, 79, no. 3 (August 2013): 631.

² Jean Van Delinder, "Gender and the Civil Rights Movement," *Sociology Compass* 3, no. 6 (2009): 989.

³ LaVerne Gyant, "Passing the torch: African American women in the civil rights movement," *Journal of black studies* 26, no. 5 (1996): 639.

it was not surprising that Black women became heavily involved in the civil rights movement from the beginning, as they had been the backbone of Black community organizations and racial advancement for decades.

While Black women were highly involved in the civil rights movement, these women were not a homogenous group. They came from different geographic and socio-economic backgrounds and had diverse roles and experiences within the movement.⁴ Not all the women who participated in the movement were young and college-educated; Black women of all ages, many of whom had not completed high school or college were active participants in civil rights during the 1960s.⁵ Therefore, while Black women experienced many of the same challenges within the movement, they were not a homogenous group and their diverse backgrounds influenced their experience within the civil rights movement.

Despite the crucial roles Black women played, Black men have traditionally been celebrated as the leaders and key figures of the civil rights movement. The most famous of these men is undoubtedly Baptist minister and activist Martin Luther King, Jr. Much of the literature and scholarship on civil rights “focused mainly on the roles of visible leaders, the men, and paid scant attention to the role of women”.⁶ However, more recent scholarship, as well as primary sources, have illuminated the instrumental contributions of women in the movement. Black women often took on “leadership-like roles without being formally acknowledged as a ‘leader’”.⁷ This is partly because the civil rights movement and its origins were heavily tied to the Black church, where only men occupied formal leadership positions.⁸ Although Black women have

⁴ Gyant, "Passing the torch," 632, 640.

⁵ Jenny Irons, "THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION: A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement," *Gender & Society* 12, no. 6 (December 1998): 695.

⁶ Irons, "THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION," 693.

⁷ Van Delinder, "Gender and the Civil Rights Movement," 990.

⁸ Van Delinder, "Gender and the Civil Rights Movement," 990.

historically played important roles in the Black church, they ‘historically have not been allowed the opportunity to become ministers, deacons, or trustees—the ‘heads’ and top decision makers in the male-dominated hierarchy of the Black Baptist church.’⁹ Due to patriarchal gender norms in society, women were also granted less access than men to the public sphere, where much of the high-profile civil rights events were played out.¹⁰ Therefore, due to gender norms within society and the Black Baptist church, women were often excluded from formal leadership roles in the movement, and civil rights literature and scholarship have largely focused on Black men like Martin Luther King, Jr.

However, Black women did take on important leadership roles in the movement, even if they were not always formally recognized as leaders. Many of these women, like their foremothers in previous decades “did what they had to do to make things better in their communities.”¹¹ Black women of diverse backgrounds “performed some of the most important” roles of the movement at the local, state, and national levels.¹² These women took on both formal and informal leadership roles.¹³ Although some women never thought of themselves as leaders in a formal sense, they were highly respected by their peers.¹⁴ For example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 that earned Martin Luther King Jr., national recognition as a civil rights leader “was nevertheless an event that was initiated and sustained by Black women active in the community” such as JoAnn Robinson “and other mostly educated women of the Women's Political Council (WPC)”.¹⁵ While the Montgomery Bus Boycott also made Rosa Parks a national symbol, unlike Dr. King, she “is largely remembered as the symbolic representation of

⁹ Bernice McNair Barnett, “INVISIBLE SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN LEADERS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class,” *Gender & Society* 7, no. 2 (June 1993): 170.

¹⁰ Van Delinder, “Gender and the Civil Rights Movement,” 988.

¹¹ Gyant, “Passing the torch,” 642.

¹² Barnett, “INVISIBLE SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN LEADERS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT,” 168.

¹³ Gyant, “Passing the torch,” 642.

¹⁴ Gyant, “Passing the torch,” 642.

¹⁵ Barnett, “INVISIBLE SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN LEADERS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT,” 168.

the Montgomery bus boycott rather than for her extensive participatory role in the broader civil rights struggle.”¹⁶ The Montgomery Bus Boycott example reveals both how Black women were instrumental to the movement and how male leaders became the public faces of the movement instead of the women who worked behind the scenes.

Sexism and gender roles within the movement and associated organizations impacted both Black and white women. Although Black and white women came from different backgrounds, had different motivations for participation, and had different experiences within the movement, they were affected by the same sexism and prescribed gender roles. Jean Van Delinder argues that “Regardless of race, engagement in civic practices was outside women’s circumscribed domestic social domain.”¹⁷ Due to the “overt sexism of civil rights organizations”, men took on active roles in the movement while women were often consigned to clerical work or other less public roles.¹⁸ Therefore, neither Black nor white women were expected to take on high-profile public leadership roles. Gender was a “constraining factor” for women who participated in the civil rights movement, and “as a result of gendered societal roles, women brought different skills to the civil rights movement—skills related to maternalism, nurturance, and domesticity.”¹⁹ For example, Southern Black women acted as surrogate mothers for younger activists, providing housing, food, and support to volunteers.²⁰ However, younger women, especially those involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) challenged dominant gender roles through their style and dress. In the early 1960s, women in SNCC took to wearing denim and no makeup in attempts to desexualize themselves, blur gender roles within

¹⁶ Van Delinder, “Gender and the Civil Rights Movement,” 990.

¹⁷ Van Delinder, “Gender and the Civil Rights Movement,” 988.

¹⁸ Van Delinder, “Gender and the Civil Rights Movement,” 992.

¹⁹ Irons, “THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION,” 699, 700.

²⁰ Dennis J Urban, “THE WOMEN OF SNCC: STRUGGLE, SEXISM, AND THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS, 1960-66,” *International Social Science Review* 77, no. 3/4 (2002): 187.

the organization, and avoid sexual assault.²¹ Therefore, gender roles and sexism within the movement constrained women regardless of race. While some women incorporated traditional roles such as mothering and behind-the-scenes organization into their participation, many younger women such as those in SNCC challenged gender roles through their appearance and clothing.

Overt sexism existed in two of the most prominent civil rights organizations: the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and SNCC. Black ministers dominated the SCLC's membership.²² While involved with the SCLC, Ella Baker experienced first-hand the sexism that was pervasive throughout the organization and “began criticizing SCLC for its male-dominated, hierarchical structure.”²³ In an interview from 1974, Baker explains, “I knew I didn't have any significant role in the minds of those who constituted the organization.”²⁴ Baker claims that she was not respected or seen as “a person of authority” within the SCLC.²⁵ Like Baker, Septima Poinsette Clark also felt that the SCLC was not a positive environment for women to work in. In a 1986 interview, Clark explains, “I was on the executive staff of SCLC, but the men on it didn't listen to me too well.”²⁶ Of her fellow SCLC workers, she states, “those men didn't have any faith in women, none whatsoever. They just thought that women were sex symbols and had no contribution to make.”²⁷ Clark goes on to say she sees the sexism of many male activists

²¹ Ford, “SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress,” 627.

²² Ford, “SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress,” 628.

²³ Urban, “THE WOMEN OF SNCC,” 185.

²⁴ “Interview with Ella Baker by Eugene Walker, 4 September 1974 (G-0007), pp. 34-46,” in *the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.* Included in *How Did African American Women Shape the Civil Rights Movement and What Challenges Did They Face?*, Documents selected and interpreted by Gail S. Murray, (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2010): 38.

²⁵ “Interview with Ella Baker by Eugene Walker,” 38.

²⁶ “The Role of Women,” in *Septima Poinsette Clark and Cynthia Stokes Brown, Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement (Navarro, Calif.: Wild Trees Press, 1986), pp. 77-83*, Included in *How Did African American Women Shape the Civil Rights Movement and What Challenges Did They Face?*, Documents selected and interpreted by Gail S. Murray, (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2010): 77.

²⁷ “The Role of Women,” 77.

as “one of the weaknesses of the civil rights movement”.²⁸ Clark and Baker’s personal experiences demonstrate how sexism within the SCLC limited women’s meaningful participation. Ella Baker’s dissatisfaction with the SCLC led her to create SNCC in 1960 as a student-led organization that would have its “own ideologies and tactics”.²⁹ However, SNCC would also come to be imbued with sexism and gender roles that impacted women’s experiences.

Although Ella Baker created SNCC out of a desire to create a younger, more egalitarian, and less hierarchical organization, women in SNCC faced many of the same issues that had existed in the SCLC. At an SNCC retreat in 1964, women in the organization attempted to address sexual discrimination and discuss the role of women within the organization.³⁰ Their complaints included that women were often assigned “clerical and meaningless tasks”, in leadership roles their authority was not respected, and that SNCC’s male members saw women as inferior and “did not believe that sexual discrimination was a problem within the group”.³¹ Although women in SNCC worked “as much as, if not more than, any male members”³² they faced sexism within the organization from their male peers. However, these women did attempt to address the sexism in the organization, and their feminist sentiments paved the way for the women’s movement. Scholars have different interpretations of how SNCC influenced the women’s movement. Was the women’s movement of the 1960s an extension of SNCC’s successes or a reaction to sexism within the organization? That question is outside the scope of this paper, however, there is strong evidence that “SNCC helped spur the modern women’s rights movement during the 1960s”.³³ Women’s experiences in SNCC were impacted by sexism and

²⁸ “The Role of Women,” 79.

²⁹ Urban, “THE WOMEN OF SNCC,” 628.

³⁰ Urban, “THE WOMEN OF SNCC,” 187.

³¹ Urban, “THE WOMEN OF SNCC,” 187-88.

³² Urban, “THE WOMEN OF SNCC,” 185.

³³ Urban, “THE WOMEN OF SNCC,” 188.

they were often not taken seriously by their male peers, however, they fought hard to have this sexual discrimination addressed, and this would come to be influential for the 1960's women's movement.

While women of all races in the civil rights movement faced sexism, there were also important differences between the experiences of Black and white women in the movement. Regardless of individual background, Black women's status in society was inferior to white women. Jenny Irons argues that "while some Black women may have had a higher socioeconomic status or education level than some white women, they were inevitably treated as socially and politically inferior."³⁴ White supremacy and racism directly impacted the lives of Black women. Their lived experience also meant they had different motivations than white women for joining the movement. Black women were motivated by the systemic racism and discrimination they experienced and issues such as "racial injustices, poor living conditions, lack of participation in the system, and the high rate of illiteracy among adults and children, which prevented adults from being able to register to vote."³⁵ On the other hand, white women were not directly impacted by racism. Although their motivations were diverse, they tended to be driven by their own moral and ideological commitments to the movement's aims. In some cases, Black women even came to resent white women in the movement, as they saw their participation as "motivated by a paternalistic racism."³⁶ Every woman had her own motivations for joining the movement, however, the direct impact of racism on Black women's lives influenced not only their motivations for participation but also the kind of roles they took on.

Black women were much more likely than white women to participate in high-risk activities. The impacts of oppressive racism and white supremacy on Black women's lives meant

³⁴ Irons, "THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION," 702.

³⁵ Gyant, "Passing the torch," 683.

³⁶ Van Delinder, "Gender and the Civil Rights Movement," 992.

that they “were more highly motivated to risk bodily harm for freedom.”³⁷ Irons argues that “Black women stood to ‘gain more’ from participation and therefore were willing to risk more.”³⁸ Black women who were involved in the movement and whose involvement was publicly known faced great danger, as demonstrated by Anne Moody’s experiences. In her biography, Moody’s life is continually threatened due to her activism. One example of this is when a group of white men plans and attempts to kill her and her fellow CORE workers at their office in Canton, Mississippi.³⁹ Moody remembers about hiding out back in the tall weeds, “I kept thinking about what might happen to us if they found us out there. I tried hard not to think about it. But I couldn’t help it. I could see them stomping us in the face and shooting us.”⁴⁰ Moody also experienced violence during her participation in the 1963 Woolworth’s sit-in and was arrested and jailed many times for her activism.⁴¹ She constantly lived in an “atmosphere of fear and threats.”⁴² Fear and the threat of danger and violence were realities many Black women in the movement lived with daily. However, their desire to make a change in society motivated them to continue the work, even though it was highly dangerous.

While a few white women also participated in high-risk activities, overall, their participation in the movement was much more low risk. Irons argues that while white women did face some risks such as ostracization and threatening phone calls, these risks did not involve ‘being beaten by police, hiding pictures of one’s family to keep them from harm, or taking alternate routes home from meetings to protect personal safety.’⁴³ White women—especially middle-class women—often participated in “low risk institutional activism,” which involved

³⁷ Irons, “THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION,” 702.

³⁸ Irons, “THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION,” 698.

³⁹ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1976), 329.

⁴⁰ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 328.

⁴¹ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 288, 296.

⁴² Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 335.

⁴³ Irons, “THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION,” 696.

working with religious and non-religious organizations.⁴⁴ The difference in roles based on race is also related to the fact that Black and white women had different recruitment networks. Southern Black women usually became involved in the movement through their grassroots and religious networks. In contrast, when white women joined the movement, they “were not recruited through their individual congregations” and while they too got involved through religious networks, “the locus of these networks was on college campuses, not in pulpits or Sunday school.”⁴⁵ White women who did become involved in civil rights were often college students, and support for the civil rights movement was much less common among white women than Black women, especially in the South. Therefore, the kinds of activities women performed in the movement were heavily impacted by their race, which also was tied to how they became involved in civil rights.

In conclusion, both Black and white women faced sexism in civil rights organizations which impacted their experiences and how they were viewed but Black women were more likely to engage in high-risk activism because of the direct impact of racism, discrimination, and inequality on their lives. Black and white women had different motivations for becoming involved in the movement, and they also became involved through different recruitment networks. Black women who were engaged in high-risk activism commonly experienced violence and threat of violence. The work and leadership of women, but especially Black women who were the backbone of the movement, has been largely under-recognized. Recently, more attention and scholarship has focused on these women. However, there is room in further scholarship and popular culture for increased awareness and celebration of these women and their important contributions to the civil rights movement.

⁴⁴ Irons, “THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION,” 698.

⁴⁵ Irons, “THE SHAPING OF ACTIVIST RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION,” 704.

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