

Women in the Civil Rights Movement

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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 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 performed leadership-like roles without being recognized as leaders.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 _____ 632, 640.

⁵ the Mississippi Civil Rights

Gender & Society 12, no. 6 (December 1998): 695.

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

Regardless of race, engagement in civic practices was outside circumscribed domestic social domain. ¹⁷ 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 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, , 990.

¹⁷ Van Delinder, , 988.

¹⁸ Van Delinder, Rights Movement, 992.

¹⁹ IST RECRUITMENT AN

²⁰ 699, 700.

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 began criticizing SCLC for its male-dominated, hierarchical structure.²³ In an interview from 1974, Baker explained, "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 "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,

as one of the weaknesses of the civil rights movement.²⁸

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experiences demonstrate how sexism within the SCL

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led her to create SNCC in 1960 as a

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own ideologies and tactics.²⁹ However, SNCC

would also

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 in

leadership roles their authority was not respected, and that male members saw women

as inferior did not believe that sexual discrimination was a problem within the group.³¹

as much as, if not more than, any male member.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

Scholars have different interpretations of how SNCC influenced the

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successes or a reaction to sexism within the organization? That question is outside the scope of

this paper, however,

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

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. White women also 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 .59 Tm0 g0 G[,)]

Rights Movement and What Challenges Did They Face?, Documents selected and interpreted by Gail S. Murray. (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2010).

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