

‘The Only Position for Women in SNCC is Prone’:

Stokely Carmichael and the
Perceived Patriarchy of Civil
Rights Organisations in America¹

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There is the danger in our culture that because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement ... There are those, some of the young people [of SNCC] especially, who have said to me that if I had not been a woman I would have been well known in certain places, and perhaps held certain kinds of positions. – Ella Baker, 1970²

Until relatively recently, historiography concerning the Civil Rights movement and its organisations has been fairly devoid of the study of the participation of women, focusing instead on certain charismatic, notably black male individuals such as Martin Luther King Jnr., Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X.³ Steven Lawson, for example, has traced the evolution of

1 Note the following abbreviations are used throughout the article:

CORE- *Congress of Racial Equality*

MFDP – *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party*

NAACP – *National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People*

SCLC – *Southern Christian Leadership Conference*

SNCC – *Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee*

2 Ella Baker, *Developing Community Leadership*, Taped interview with Gerda Lerner (December 1970) paragraphs 15 and 14, respectively.

3 Joan C. Browning explores the extent to which women’s activities have been glossed over in Civil Rights Historiography in her article, ‘Invisible Revolutionaries: White Women in Civil Rights Historiography’ *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (Fall 1996). Browning explains that a majority of scholarship has been written by men, who have ‘written movement history mostly about men’ (p186) and that women’s participation has been largely neglected, despite them having performed significant roles in both direct, ‘front-line’ work as well as behind the scenes. She criticises male scholars for having based their scholarship on information from few sources, which made their work inherently biased towards men and a centralised male leadership, and specifies David J. Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jnr, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, (New York: W. Morrow, 1986), and Taylor Branch’s *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989). Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian*

historiographical approaches to Civil Rights leadership and participation. He identifies three distinct periods of historiographical approach: that of the late 1960s and 70s, which focussed on national leaders and events; that of the late 1970s and 80s, which focussed on grassroots and community-level organisations; and that of the 1990s, which sought to link the national with the local and determine the importance of 'normal' people, including women. As a result, much early historiography was highly male-centric.⁴ The preoccupation with the male leadership of the movement has meant that the valuable and widespread work that women did has been overlooked or disregarded, both in the historiography and also amongst their contemporaries. In reality, however, it appears that a majority of the work done at a grassroots level, along with the bulk of the organisation, was facilitated by women; it is estimated that women between the ages of thirty to fifty were more than three times more likely to participate than men of the same age.⁵ Women played a significant and important role within the movements, particularly within the Students Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), in which 'it was no secret that young people and women led organisationally.'⁶ Clearly, then, the position for women in SNCC was far from prone; they acted on their own initiative within an anti-hierarchical framework to achieve objectives that they themselves had set, not to meet the aims of any specific male leader. This new culture of grassroots democratic activism was not specific to Civil Rights organisations, however; these ideas underpinned many significant movements in 1960s America, including the Black Power movement and its organisations, the other facet of the black freedom struggle. Anti-Vietnam War organisations in the late 1950s, such as SANE, appeared largely at a grassroots level as a reaction to anti-war materials in the media. Free speech organisations in the north were initiated by Californian students at an everyday level, and women and gay people began calling not just for 'rights' but for 'liberation.'⁷ This explosion of grassroots protest was a result of a culmination of factors; the majority of activists were young people, who were of a generation that had been raised in times of political activism. Importantly, many of this generation had had educational opportunities that were unavailable to earlier generations. Finally, the social and economic shifts as a result of the war meant that more and more people realised that marginalised groups should, and could, fight to become seen as legitimate groups within society.

These new forms of anti-hierarchical organisation meant that many women could participate more fully than ever before. Despite this active participation, though, many women's work was still

Leadership Conference (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987) examines the SCLC and comments on the significance of male participation and on Martin Luther King Jnr as the 'leader' of the Montgomery bus boycotts. Fairclough, however, does acknowledge the limitations of focussing only on King and his 'cult of personality' (p3), but maintains that the SCLC was dominated by King. Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and its sources*, (New York: Free Press, 1992) and Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. And the Word that Moved America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) portray King's input as a preacher and orator as central to the success of the movement as a whole.

4 Steven Lawson, 'Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,' *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 2, (April 1991), 456-471.

5 Charles Payne, 'Men Led, But Women Organised: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta,' in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse and Barbara Woods, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), 2.

6 Lawrence Guyot, quoted in Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered*, (New York: Putnam, 1977), 241.

7 Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretive History*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), chapters 5, 6, 7, 9 and 12.

perceived as of inferior importance to that of men. Consequently, a kind of perceived patriarchy was created in which women were at once doing vast amounts of work for the movement and also gaining little credit for it.

When Stokely Carmichael stated, less than seriously, that ‘the only position for women in SNCC is prone’ in 1964, he was speaking at a time when women’s efforts were largely dismissed by those outside of Civil-Rights organisations as unimportant or ineffective. Even some of those within these organisations seemed to subscribe to this patriarchal ideology. Roy Wilkins, leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), told women such as Fannie Lou Hamer and other politically active females that they were ‘ignorant of the political process, should listen to their [male] leaders and just return home,’⁸ a sentiment echoed by Lawrence Puyot of SNCC in the mid-1960s, suggesting that they step back and let the men come forth.⁹ Carmichael was not one of these men; he supported women’s progressivism, and did not consider himself superior to the women of the movement, working happily alongside as well as below women. His seemingly chauvinist statement was made in a non-serious context; he and other SNCC members had gathered on a pier with a jug of wine, and Carmichael was performing a series of stand-up comedy routines, including one in which he was impersonating a dull-witted white reporter interviewing him. When asked about the position of women in SNCC, he answered that it was ‘prone’, to which ‘everybody cracked up,’¹⁰ possibly due to the potentially sexual connotation that ‘prone’ holds. Despite Carmichael’s light-hearted and joking response, his comment did reflect the perception of the media and of much of the wider public that women were inferior to men within the movement. These negative associations of patriarchy and women’s inferiority within the black freedom struggle and its organisations were later reinforced by the emergence of Black Power and its emphasis on black masculinity and patriarchy. Similar to Civil Rights organisations, many women did significant work in the Black Power movement, although, again, much of this work was gendered, helping with cooking for the free breakfast campaigns, etc. Women in the Black Power movement had to fight two stigmas - being black, and being women - and consequently their work was largely disregarded by a public majority on both a racial and gender-oriented front. However, it was the explicitly masculine rhetoric of Black Power that cast these women’s work even further into the shadow than their contemporaries that were active in Civil Rights organisations. Women were disregarded in much Black Power literature, and old stereotypes that reinforced the ideas of women’s inferiority and need for protection were reiterated. For example, in a 1967 Black Panther Party publication, it emphasises, ‘BLACK MEN!!! It is your duty to your women and children, to your mothers and sisters, to investigate the program of the party.’¹¹ Furthermore, Eldridge Cleaver’s 1968 speech advocating ‘pussy power’ prompted frequent use of these words in the rank and file of the party and promoted the perceived objectification of women as solely sexual commodities.¹² It is clear that female activists in both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were perceived as lacking importance in comparison to their male counterparts.

8 Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 159.

9 Payne, ‘Men Led, But Women Organised,’ 4.

10 Mary King and Mike Felwell, interviewed in Roy Hurst, ‘Stokely Carmichael’s Mixed Civil Rights Legacy’ *National Public Radio* (February 2005) <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4508288>> [accessed 17 February 2011].

11 The Black Panther Party for Self-Defence, *The Black Panther* Volume I, (California, April 25, 1967).

12 Charles E. Jones, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 33.

Despite this perception, it is clear that SNCC's conception owed much to the women who helped to found and shape its organisational structure, most significantly Ella Baker. Baker was a highly experienced activist, working initially for the NAACP in the early 1940s as a field secretary, and progressing to the national director of branches and president of the New York branch. She worked for two years with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and was a founding member of both the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and SNCC, as well as the keynote speaker at the MFDP's founding convention.¹³ Her participation with SNCC signalled a wider acknowledgement of women as important participants in the organisations of the Civil Rights movement, particularly in the area of organisation and mobilisation. SNCC's organisational structure was centred on the idea of 'participatory democracy', as put forward by Baker. This advocated grassroots leadership, group consensus, a decentralised leadership and was anti-hierarchical. Baker claimed that 'strong people don't need strong leaders.'¹⁴ This new form of organisational structure distinguished SNCC from other organisations, such as SCLC, which was focused on an ideologically committed and highly centralised leadership.¹⁵ The insistence on group participation and community leadership meant that everyone was expected to, and did, participate, creating an atmosphere in which women could thrive as organisers and leaders. Men were perceived to hold the most important positions because they dominated the titled roles within SNCC, but many women held power without these roles. In fact, often they did not want these roles, as they frequently meant confinement to the office - women could have 'the power without the title or the title without the power.'¹⁶ For this reason, the media frequently disregarded women's roles as insignificant, only reporting the actions and leadership of those in titled positions and portraying the movement as nationally coherent and male-dominated. This ignored the reality that the movement was much more effective in the localised sphere in which women played significant roles as important activists. Scholarship has only recently begun to reconsider the Civil Rights Movement as a series of local phenomena, and the re-discovery of these important women activists does much to emphasise the marginalisation that these women faced, both in the historiography and in the perceptions of their contemporaries, as a result of limited exposure on the national stage.¹⁷

Belinda Robnett has coined the term 'bridge leaders' in regards to women's leadership. Although not formally titled, she claims that women often filled the crucially important role of joining the personal and the political,¹⁸ and had the 'ability to connect the needs of the people with the goals and objectives of a movement.'¹⁹ Women who were active as church or community workers were

13 Baker, *Developing Community Leadership*.

14 Carol Mueller, 'Ella Baker and the Origins of Participatory Democracy' in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse and Barbara Woods, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), 51.

15 Belinda Robnett, 'Women in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee: Ideology, Organisational Structure, and Leadership' in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 131.

16 Ibid. 134.

17 Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, 'Introduction: Gender and the Civil Rights Movement,' in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 8.

18 Robnett, 'Women in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee,' 141.

19 Jacqueline A. Rouse, "'We Seek To Know...in Order to Speak the Truth": Nurturing the seeds of discontent -

sought out by Civil Rights organisations to help tailor and personalise their cause to the local population, as their skills and leadership abilities positioned them at the centre of local community networks, which was essential to the movement’s success. Women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine and Victoria Gray, and their involvement in SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and later the MFDP, are key examples of ‘bridge leadership’.²⁰ The importance of the work undertaken by women shows clearly that their position in SNCC was not ‘prone’ but highly important, although often unrecognised on the national stage.

Although the work of women in these organisations was clearly significant, they remained gendered. Participation in these organisations helped to politicise women in various ways, and allowed them to realise their potential as activists in the struggle for civil rights. This realisation led to many women’s discontent over gendered work in organisations, having gained an ‘awareness of themselves as being capable as men but held back from full participation.’²¹ In some cases, such as in the SCLC, this gendered structure of work developed from an inherently gendered foundation; the leaders and organisers of SCLC were originally from the black clergy, who were, by definition, men. In this conservative context, traditional gender roles were observed, and female participation that deviated from feminine roles, such as cooking and secretarial work, was largely disregarded.²² In other, less structured organisations, such as SNCC, women’s work was still gendered, although less consciously so. Instead of feminine roles being defined by the structure of the organisation, they were shaped by common public perceptions of male and female abilities, such as the masculine ability to lead and speak publically and charismatically, and the feminine ability to organise and develop consensus at a grassroots level.

It was not only outside the movement where the significance of gender was questioned; in 1964 and 1965 Casey Hayden and Mary King wrote memos outlining their (and other women’s) frustration at the gender imbalances within SNCC, and its failure to recognise issues related to women’s concerns. Although they did not claim explicit notions of male superiority within SNCC, nor suggest that women were inferior to men in the movement in reality, they claimed that ‘assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep-rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro.’²³ These assumptions were held both within and outside of the movement, and meant that women were often assigned work that was traditionally ‘female’, such as secretarial or domestic-based work. Hayden and King saw this as a tragic waste of many women’s skills and experience, and could be perceived as simply a token membership. Hayden and King were not, however, suggesting that the position of women in SNCC was unimportant, even within these gendered settings; they appreciated that

Septima P. Clark and Participatory Leadership,’ in *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights – Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 96.

²⁰ Vicki Crawford, ‘African American Women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’ in *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights – Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 135.

²¹ Casey Hayden and Mary King, ‘A Kind of Memo...to a number of Other Women in the Peace and Freedom Movements,’ in *Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter B. Levy, (Westport: Greenwood Press: 1992), 198.

²² Tiffany Joseph, ‘Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement: 1960-1970’ (Senior thesis, Brown University, 2004).

²³ Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: Morrow, 1987), 568.

women were a 'crucial factor that keeps the movement running on a day-to-day basis.'²⁴ However, the suggestion that women were structurally obligated to participate equally, as put forward by Robnett, is disputed here, with Hayden and King suggesting that women did not have equal 'say-so' in everyday decision making. Instead, they suggested that the widespread perception of women as less able activists and leaders, along with the social stereotype of the passivity and sociability of women, allowed the assumption that women were inherently suited to grassroots organisational work, rather than leadership roles. This in turn resulted in a (possibly unintentional) patriarchal set of values held by the male leaders within the organisation and an unconscious assumption that men were the naturally superior leaders in struggle for civil rights.

Although this public perception of women within these organisations was fairly consistent, the division as to what women could and couldn't be seen to be doing was sharper in some organisations than others. Before the Civil Rights Movement was publicly acknowledged in the mid-1950's, the work of women in civil rights organisations was determined much by their class; in Cleveland, Ohio, for example, in the NAACP, a middle-class organisation, they stated that 'to do a good job, we must have a man,'²⁵ particularly in field work, whereas in more working-class organisations, the division of labour was much less defined, with women's work often celebrated and their industriousness applauded.

During the Civil Rights Movement proper, gender roles within organisations shifted to reflect a more generational disparity. Older, more traditional or 'conservative' organisations such as the NAACP or the SCLC had rigid leadership structures that would not recognise women as leaders, as their activities at the grassroots did not fit their traditional definition of leadership; women such as Septima Clark and Fannie Lou Hamer were only 'considered "supportive" of the leadership that was provided by the men.'²⁶ Newer organisations such as SNCC and the MFDP subscribed to the idea of participatory democracy, so women were able to exercise more significant leadership and had a more equal place than their sisters in the more conservative organisations. Interestingly, even within the 'newer' organisations, there seems to have been a generational split regarding work; the older, founding members seemed to work more diligently and comprehensively, and these are the women we see as Robnett's 'bridge leaders' or Sacks' 'centrewomen'. It seemed, to the older generation, that because 'direct action is so glamorous and packed with emotion ... most young people prefer demonstrations over genuine education';²⁷ perhaps the younger generation took for granted and accepted the more equal place for women in the movement which their elder counterparts had to work hard for. These younger people, who were so eager to protest and demonstrate, were indicative of the Black Power movement to come, which heralded ultra-conservative views towards women and gender roles.

Throughout all of the most noted events of the Civil Rights Movement, women within different organisations have played significant, if not fundamental, roles. In the Montgomery Bus Boycotts of 1955-56, Rosa Parks, along with her sisters in the Women's Political Council, effectively began

24 Ibid. 568.

25 Cleveland NAACP Branch, Internal Memorandum to the New York Office, 1947.

26 Rouse, "We Seek To Know..."; 116.

27 Septima P. Clark, Memorandum to Dr Martin Luther King Jnr., [December 12th, 1963], Septima Clark Papers, Folder 2, Box 8, Avery Research Centre for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

what became known as the Civil Rights Movement. In 1960, Ella Baker founded SNCC, one of the most influential civil rights organisations in existence. Septima Clark worked hard within the SCLC to establish Citizenship Education programmes, and Fannie Lou Hamer fought for black representation and voter registration in the South, eventually founding the MFDP in 1964. These were only four prominent women in a movement in which thousands of women worked at a grassroots level to define and develop their organisations and their respective aims. The work of these women, however, was largely ignored and distorted by the media and by the public perception that men led the movement; Martin Luther King, Jnr. was a household name, whereas most women struggled to be heard.

This focus on charismatic male leaders was one that was formed by a combination of contemporary social expectations of leadership, and the media, which portrayed many civil rights organisations as hierarchical, with a dominant (male) leader. Charismatic men were more frequently chosen to be publicly displayed, and, as the media was a primary form of information dissemination about the movements, many members of the public assumed this top-down, patriarchal model to be correct. For example, in 1964, Martin Luther King Jnr. was Time magazine’s man of the year and won the Nobel Peace Prize, an unprecedented honour for a black man.²⁸ In the same year, many thousands of ordinary women, such as Amelia Platts Boynton, worked to educate other black people in the Freedom Summer, teaching citizenship, politicising themselves and organising and facilitating rallies, meetings and classes.²⁹ They, however, received little or no public acknowledgement and credit as individuals. Their work was most effective as a group and was recognised only as such, and was considered only as supplementary to the work of the dominant leaders. Although King and other charismatic national figures helped to energize and inspire local movements, it was the ‘thousands of unsung local leaders [that] did the hard grass-roots organising...that challenged the entrenched authority of the white power structure.’³⁰

28 Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 45.

29 Amelia Platts Boynton, *Bridge Across Jordan*, (New York: Carlton, 1979), 138.

30 Lawson, ‘Freedom Then, Freedom Now,’ 37.
