“Men Led, but Women Organized.” To what extent do you agree with this assessment of the Civil Rights Movement?

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History 2441

Race, Gender and Cultural Protest in the United States since 1865

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The American way of life changed drastically after the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The issue of race was on center stage and for the first time in America’s history, the phrase “separate but equal” would no longer be applicable to the people of America. However, this sudden fight for equality did not apply to women. Although African Americans were fighting for equal rights, women were still left unnoticed in their fight for equality during the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement was known for being organized, disciplined and in the end, effective. But how did these peaceful protests get created and how did they work so well? While many historians believe that it was through the guidance of the key leaders in the civil rights movement, I believe that it was women who obtained the level of order and organization needed to ensure that the civil rights movement would be a success. Women were behind the scenes at work in order to guarantee that the civil rights movement would successfully bring segregation to an end so that African Americans could get equal opportunities as the white population. While often times forgotten, women played a crucial role in the civil rights movement through many different avenues. Women were involved in the civil rights movement by organizing protests, participating in boycotts, as well as attending civil rights organizational meetings. This paper will address the reality that the civil rights movement worked under a “Men led, women organized” title. My argument will prove this through focusing on the different ways in which women contributed to the civil rights movement and what provoked these women to participate the way they did. I believe that while the majority of leadership in the civil rights movement was from male leaders, there were many female leaders as well. However, these female leaders are not as historically recognized as their male
counterparts are and therefore their leadership and service to the civil rights movement are often forgotten.

The civil rights movement was filled with organizations that did not allow women the same type of leadership positions that men were allowed to have. These organizations, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, did allow women involvement but were hesitant in allowing women to hold high leadership positions. Ironically, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference could trace their roots to women and their leadership role. The initial spark that led to the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was Rosa Parks and her refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955.\(^1\) The Southern Christian Leadership Conference of course focused on the promotion of equal rights for African Americans but it also held the Christian beliefs of male superiority over women. Even the few women who were offered leadership positions believed that the leadership gap between the two genders was not filled. Septima Clark was one such woman. Septima Clark was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina and had been openly working toward African American equality for most of her life. She eventually became the first woman elected to the executive board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.\(^2\) She openly discussed her disappointment in Dr. Martin


Unknown. (n.d.) [online].


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Luther King Jr. and other Southern Christian Leadership Conference leaders for their lack of including women in their operations. She states “Like other black ministers, Dr. King didn’t think too much of the way women could contribute...I see this as one of the weakness of the civil rights movement, the way the men look at the women...In stories about the civil rights movement you hear mostly about the black ministers. But if you talk to the women who were there, you’ll hear another story. I think the civil rights movement would never have taken off if some women didn’t start to speak up.” Clark’s testimony shows that even though she was given a leadership position, Dr. King and other leaders did not have the same level of respect for her and her ability to contribute to the organization’s plans and policies. While Septima Clark did hold a position in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference her full potential was not achieved due to the fact that she was a woman and those around her did not believe that a mere woman could be successful in such a position.

But not all committees in the civil rights movement were built around a Christian foundation. The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was the committee during the civil rights movement that was the most accepting of women involvement. Motivated by the Greensboro Sit In, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee emerged as the new organization for young people for all races and genders. Many young women became inspired to help out in the civil rights struggle and found the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee as their way to contribute to the civil rights movement. An example of one of these young women is Joan C. Browning. Joan C. Browning attended Georgia State Women’s college, but was forced to leave

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3 Septima Clark in Davis, J. (2001) *The Civil Rights Movement* p. 149
when it was discovered that she went to a black church for worship service. After leaving college, she went to Atlanta, Georgia where she found out about the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Here Browning became one of the nine people who took the 1961 Freedom Ride to Albany. She was chose on the basis of her skin color, in order to more diversify the train. Browning has stated however that if her contribution to the civil rights movement is given any recognition she would want it to “...be because of the content of my character and not because of the color of my skin.” Browning is just one of many young women who were able to help the civil rights cause through the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Women like Joan C. Browning were allowed to participate but were not given the chance of obtaining a true leadership role.

While the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee allowed women to be involved, such as Joan C. Browning, many were not given such an inspirational job like that of Browning’s 1961 Freedom Ride. Mary King and Casey Hayden were young white women volunteering in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and wrote memos addressing their frustration with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. In their memo, they criticized the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee for not addressing women’s issues within the civil rights movement. Stating that “…in SNCC, women are the crucial factor that keeps the movement running on a day-to-day basis. Yet they are not given equal say so when it comes to

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\text{Joan C. Browning, “Invisible Revolutionaries: White Women in Civil Rights Historiography.”} \textit{Journal of Women’s History} 8 (Fall, 1996.): 186-204.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{5}}\text{Joan C. Browning, “Invisible Revolutionaries: White Women in Civil Rights Historiography.”} \textit{Journal of Women’s History} 8 (Fall, 1996.): 186-204.\]
day-to-day decision making.  This statement demonstrates the very definition that is “Men led, women organized.” Here Mary King and Casey Hayden are being denied a more serious role in the civil rights movement simply because they are women and are expected to have more “‘female’ kinds of jobs such as: typing, desk work, telephone work, filing, library work, cooking, and the assistant kind of administrative work but rarely the ‘executive’ kind.” These positions that the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee were giving to women were the kinds of jobs that allowed women to be included but not jobs that allowed them to contribute. These jobs were the traditional women roles that women were trying so hard to get away from.

While women like Joan C. Browning, Mary King and Casey Hayden were actively involved in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, many women across the nation were simply followers. These thousands of women are forgotten about because their names are not remembered like those of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Although these women did not hold any positions in a Civil Rights organization, their part was crucial, especially those of African American women. Many African American women in civil rights organizations were used as “bridge leaders”.

Historians use the term “bridge leader” to describe African American women who bridged the gap between these Civil Rights organizations and the traditional African American family. In some places, it was not popular to take place in the civil

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7 King, Mary and Hayden, Casey. (1965) *Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement* in *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the Civil Rights Movement*

rights movement. Even in predominantly African American communities, the civil rights movement had trouble gaining popularity. Many rural African Americans thought that the civil rights movement was just causing trouble for them and their families. This is where a “bridge leader” comes into play. It was through these African American women, also known as “bridge leaders”, that African American families and communities would become interested in the civil rights organization and cause. “Bridge leaders” attended meetings, or some other civil rights function, and then took what they learned back to their home and community. These “bridge leaders” allowed civil rights organizations to reach out to people who would have never been involved with the civil rights struggle otherwise. Despite their name, these “bridge leaders” were not leaders within a civil rights organization. These women were instrumental in involving many African American families in the civil rights movement. While the men led these organizations, these “bridge leaders” organized who would show up to the numerous rallies, boycotts, protests and meetings where the African American male leader would speak. This is just another way in which women contributed to the civil rights movement, that the world has forgotten.

What is truly unbelievable about the civil rights movement is that more women were involved. Looking at civil rights photographs and testimonies, women are everywhere. They took place in boycotts and protests; they were a large majority of the followers of the civil rights movement. Yet, they had no leadership in the movement. The question remains why women were so involved yet so ignored as leaders. Statistics show that many organizations,

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such as the Southern Christian Leadership Committee, grew out of the church. The church in turn had a higher number of women members and therefore they became more involved with the cause than the men.\textsuperscript{10} Having more women members in civil rights organization made it easier for the men to take the leadership positions since they were the few that were “man enough” for the job. By having so many women in the organization it also led for the women to become the “bridge leaders” mentioned earlier. The women involved in the organization then simply became members who did not lead, but organized.

When looking intensely at the civil rights movement and in detail, women are present everywhere. But when one just thinks of the civil rights movement, only a few women come to mind. Women contributed so much to the civil rights movement yet they have received hardly any credit. This is mainly because women’s roles within the civil rights movement were limited by the gender roles of the time. The roles that women were given during the civil rights movement were ones, not of leadership, but ones of submissive activities. Like Mary King and Casey Hayden complaining of women doing the typing, cleaning and other “feminine” jobs. Even the women who were given a higher up position, such as Septima Clark, were not treated fairly within their civil rights organization. These testimonies from these women show just how exclusive the civil rights leadership arena was. By having the leadership roles being so exclusive to men, women were forced to be the organizers. If women could not get the podium they deserved then they were forced to prepare the meetings, rallies, boycotts and protests that the

men leaders would speak before. By preparing these events that the men spoke before, the women were then organizing and the men were leading.
Bibliography


Unknown. (n.d.) [online].

