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## The Role of Black Women in the American Civil Rights Movement

### Cover Page Footnote

I would wholeheartedly like to thank Dr. Michael Clemons who guided me through this research process and gave me valuable feedback throughout. I would also like to thank my high school history teacher, Mr. Kevin Wasinger, for giving me the necessary research and history foundation.

# THE ROLE OF BLACK WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

By Ashley Levins

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989, and it is through this lens that the Civil Rights Movement in the United States can be fully understood (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is the view that multiple overlapping identities can impact individuals, their paradigms, and their oppression, especially that of gender and race. White American women did not earn the right to vote until 1919; however, Black<sup>1</sup> American women could not until the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (White, n.d.). The American Civil Rights Movement began and spread as a means of obtaining proper suffrage and equal protections for people of color in the United States, specifically for Black Americans. Thus, Black women faced oppression because of both their gender and their race. Because of this overlapping oppression, Black women had a unique role in the American Civil Rights Movement. In what follows, their role in the Civil Rights Movement will be analyzed according to their involvement in the First Wave of Feminism, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the ways in which their impact has been depicted historically.

## II. PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of Black women in the American Civil Rights Movement. Primarily, the First Wave of Feminism impacted the Civil Rights Movement with the importance of intersectionality and the significance of Black female leaders of the time. Thus, Black women's lasting impact in our understanding of the Movement<sup>2</sup> as a whole can be evaluated. The overarching research questions in this study will ask the following: In what ways did the First Wave of Feminism help to impel or impede the American Civil Rights Movement? Who were the Black female leaders of the Movement, and what is their significance in the total stage of our current understanding of Civil Rights? How can the erasure of Black women in the history of the American Civil Rights Movement be explained and, therefore, effectively reversed?

## III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is imperative to our understanding of the Civil Rights Movement because Black women had a vastly different experience than White women and Black men, and it is through their perspective that a more comprehensive view of Civil Rights can be observed. Thus to understand the American Civil Rights Movement, an examination of Black women in the Movement must be made. Furthermore, it is imperative that their historical erasure be examined, as their perspectives, as previously mentioned, are vital to the overall understanding of the Movement. By examining their invisibility, we can move towards fully appreciating and recognizing their participation. This means that the research developed here can be added to the

breadth of research analyzing the American Civil Rights Movement with the added perspective and recognition of Black women in the Movement.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This analysis will be made with the help of primary and secondary sources from African American women of the time, as well as Civil Rights Scholars, with the majority of the data being from peer-reviewed journals and Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class*. This is a compilation of both firsthand and secondhand accounts on the ways in which gender, race, and socioeconomic class affect social standing, primarily how these have affected past and current feminist movements as well as the Civil Rights Movement. These sources as well as their origins and relevance will be examined. After reviewing these sources, they will be used to conduct an analysis of the role of Black women in the Movement through the study of the First Wave of Feminism and intersectionality, the prominent Black female leaders of the Movement, and the erasure of Black women throughout the Movement. These will be used as focal points of study to form an argument surrounding the influence of African American women on the American Civil Rights Movement.

#### V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this section is to assess the literature answering the previously mentioned research questions satisfactorily. This will also provide documentation for the later argument development. Sources and their origins will be discussed to provide, or diminish, credibility from

each author and their eras. Additionally, this review will situate this paper amongst the others of its kind, thus creating the appropriate atmosphere for further research and conclusions.

### *Intersectionality and The First Wave of Feminism*

As previously stated, the use of the term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989). This term is used to describe the ways in which gender, race, class, and sexuality work together in society to uplift or diminish socioeconomic experiences. According to Crenshaw herself in an interview with Columbia Law School (n.d.), “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects.” As a Black woman born in 1953<sup>3</sup>, Crenshaw provides valuable insight into Black gender issues; however, she does not directly discuss the American Civil Rights Movement in this interview. Nonetheless, this interview grants a serviceable perspective to the upcoming investigation, as it allows us to more critically examine the ways in which race and gender interact.

Before the American Civil Rights Movement, the most evident example of intersectionality in American history is within the First Wave of Feminism. This movement emphasized the importance of women’s suffrage; however, this only applied to White women. This point of study is most relevant to Angela Davis’s *Women, Race, and Class* (1994). Davis explains that within the women’s suffrage movement, which was primarily led by middle-class White women, there were strong racial barriers. For example, at the famous Seneca Falls Convention, there was not a single African American woman present (p. 57). Furthermore, famous women’s suffrage leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony held rigid racist views, as leaders like these were against the idea of Black men voting before White

women. Moreover, Anthony made it clear that she did not want a branch of her suffrage association dedicated to the rights of Black women specifically, as she wanted to maintain the support of Southern White women (p. 111).

Again, while Davis does not emphasize the American Civil Rights Movement in her writing, she exemplifies the exclusion of the African American woman among the first American feminist movement. Davis, as a Black female scholar born in 1944, offers a window into the Black feminist experience through her firsthand accounts as well as the compilation of secondhand accounts from Black female advocates.

As Professor Deborah Gray White, Chair of the Committee on Enslaved and Disenfranchised Populations in Rutgers History wrote (n.d.), White women were often uncomfortable with the thought of Black women voting. Even once women's suffrage was achieved, celebratory parades were still segregated, such as the 1913 Chicago Suffrage Parade. The Chicago Alpha Suffrage Club was asked to march in the back, so as not to give off the impression that all of the marchers were in favor of Black suffrage. Furthermore, as White wrote, Black and White women alike had gained the right to vote upon the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment; however, Black women only had this access for a short period, as their voting rights were soon stripped from them through discriminatory voting practices. Thus, while the First Wave of Feminism seemingly provided both Black and White women the right to vote, the right to vote was not formally guaranteed to African American women until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

This is the first time the First Wave of Feminism has been directly connected to the American Civil Rights Movement through the bridge of enfranchisement. As previously

mentioned, White is the Chair of the Committee on Enslaved and Disenfranchised Populations in Rutgers History for Rutgers University. Therefore, especially since she is a Black woman who was born in 1949, she is well educated on Black issues.

*The Participation of the Average Black Woman and Prominent Black Female Leaders*

According to LaVerne Gyant, “African American women have faced triple barriers – race, gender, and class” (1996, p. 629). Despite this, Black women became fearless leaders in the American Civil Rights Movement. As Gyant stated, even though very few women are considered when examining the full range of Civil Rights leaders, women were often considered the backbone of the Movement, especially due to their involvement in the church (p. 630). While involvement in the church was a large influence on whether or not a woman felt compelled to join the Movement, there were also other motivations, such as family influences and the direct experiences of racial injustices (pp. 634, 638). Many Black women involved in the Movement most commonly did not refer to themselves as leaders, despite holding important leadership positions (p. 644). This is because many African American women, and women as a collective, were conditioned to believe that men were the most effective leaders (p. 645). Furthermore, oftentimes the female leaders of the Movement were more focused on smaller community support systems and the education of fellow women (p. 644).

While this article does not list specific Black female leaders, it explains the overall role of Black women in the Movement, why they became involved, and reasons why they may have preferred a more behind-the-scenes role. This article provides valuable insight in the form of interviews with African American women involved in the American Civil Rights Movement, which makes it a pertinent source of information in this study.



White and Black women alike were involved in the Civil Rights Movement; however, according to Jenny Irons (1998), participation levels varied both in extent and severity. The majority of women involved in the Movement tended to play “motherly” roles to the men involved; for example, women like Aurelia Young often housed Movement participants, supplying them with clothes, vitamins, and food, as well as providing supplies to participants who were incarcerated (p. 699). This is considered low-risk activism, according to Irons. Young was a Black woman; however, this type of activism was typically what White women preferred, as according to Irons, they were more motivated by empathy than by a true desire to be free from oppression (p. 703). This low-risk activism was so-called “Women’s Work” activism, as there was also low-risk institutional activism through simple support of organizations such as the SNCC (p. 698). This was supported by both Black and White women, though primarily Black women. Lastly, there was high risk activism, which was almost entirely Black men and women (p. 696). This included canvassing for votes and direct involvement in large demonstrations; essentially, these activities included anything that may put them, or their family, in immediate danger. Iron also mentions that Black women were more likely to become involved through grassroots organizations and personal networks, whereas White women were more likely to be recruited from religious organizations, which affected their participation capabilities (p. 698).

Jenny Irons obtained her information through direct interviews with Black and White women involved in the American Civil Rights Movement; however, Iron mentions that she was confined by a small number of interviewees as well as the restraint of only interviewing women from Mississippi (p. 695). While Mississippi was a hotspot during the Civil Rights Movement<sup>4</sup>, this provides a definite limitation to her study. Regardless, the information provided by this source is valuable to the investigation in that it directly compares the involvement of Black

women and White women and invaluable enumerates the ways in which the two groups participated.

Specific African American female activists who are typically excluded from conversations regarding the American Civil Rights Movement are Anne Moody, Muriel Tillinghast, Ella Baker, and Septima Clark, among countless others (Duran, 2015; Barnett, 1993). Anne Moody was a Mississippian woman who was born into poverty – an experience that she did not see White people facing (Duran p. 66). Moody was quite aware of the different challenges that Black women faced in comparison to White women and thus began writing about the unfair circumstances that plagued her family specifically. Muriel Tillinghast was a volunteer for Freedom Summer (Duran p. 68). While she at first was afraid of the circumstances that would await her living in the Deep South, she overcame her fear and became a fierce leader of the Freedom Summer project. Ella Baker was a prominent organizer and youth leader, who trained young people and advised them in the Movement (Barnett p. 169). Lastly, Septima Clark specialized in educating Black adults in reading and writing (Barnett p. 170). According to Barnett, without Clark's contributions, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would have been essentially useless. These women were vital to the Movement, as they provided direct support to both participants of the Movement, future activists, and other Black individuals, involved or otherwise.

Both Duran and Barnett gathered their information through archival research and oral histories. These studies supplied necessary details about particular Black female activists who may have otherwise been overlooked as Black female Civil Rights icons have been historically invisible in comparison to their male counterparts.

*The Issue of Erasure*

Historically, Black women have been erased from conversations regarding events and movements. This is the meaning of “erasure” in this study because Black women are not typically a focal point in conversations about Civil Rights, even when their rights are directly impacted. Despite Table 1, provided by Bernice Barnett (1993), showing that African American women often participated in some of the most important activities in the Movement, they are often excluded from discussions regarding major leaders. In fact, Tables 2 and 3 provided by the same source indicates that Black women are very rarely considered when listing important leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement. While this may indicate that – since giving speeches and presentations was the most important activity, and this was a male-dominated activity – the recognition of leaders was based on public appearances. However, in certain roles such as organizational leadership, in which men and women both participated, men were still

more likely to be recognized (p. 173). This is a direct example of the erasure of Black women in the Civil Rights Movement, as their contributions are hardly recognized and appreciated.

**TABLE 1: Rank Order of Most Important Leadership Roles as Perceived by Civil Rights Leaders and Activists Interviewed**

Rank	Leadership Role	Total Weighted Score
1	Articulate/express concern and needs of followers	52
2	Define/set goals	25
3	Provide an ideology justifying action	23
4	Formulate tactics and strategies	14
5	Initiate action	13
6	Mobilize/persuade followers	10
7	Raise money	9
7	Serve as an example to followers and leaders	9
8	Organize/coordinate action	7
9	Control group interactions (e.g., conflict)	6
10	Teach/educate/train followers and leaders	5
11	Ability to not alienate colleagues and followers	3
12	Lead or direct action	2
13	Generate publicity	1
13	Obtain public sympathy and support	1

Barnett, B. M. (1993). Invisible southern black women leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: *Gender & Society*, 7(2), 162–182.

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Important		
Rank	Leader	Total Score
1	Martin Luther King, Jr.	473.0
2	Ralph David Abernathy	88.0
3	Charles Sherrod	49.0
4	Local leaders	37.5
5	Presidents of organizations	25.0
6	Women	23.0
7	E. J. Grant	21.0
8	E. D. Nixon	20.0
9	Joseph Lowery	19.5
10	Martin Luther King, Sr.	13.0
11	Hosea Williams	12.0
11	James Bevel	12.0
12	Vernon Johns	10.0
12	SNCC workers	10.0
12	NAACP lawyers	10.0
13	James Lawson	9.0
14	Georgia Gilmore	7.5
14	JoAnn Robinson/Mary Fair Burks/Sadie Brooks	7.5
14	Charles Jones/Slater King/Cordell Reagon	7.5
15	Rufus Lewis	5.0

Barnett, B. M. (1993). Invisible southern black women leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: *Gender & Society*, 7(2), 162–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124393007002002>

According to Belinda Robnett (1996), the Movement was gendered in that African American women were often confined to the role of Bridge Leaders, meaning that they were the ones who were expected to bridge the gap between organization leaders and potential constituents (p. 1667). This is not to say that men did not participate in bridging, in fact there were many prominent male Bridge Leaders; however, this was often the only role allotted to women. This crucial role is rarely seen as such because of the essential tendency for organization members to look up to male leaders and orators, rather than appreciating the women who herded them into the organization itself. Therefore, while the role of Bridge Leader was central to the growth and grassroots element of organizations within the Civil Rights Movement, the Black women involved were often invisible or forgotten as they did not have formal titles.

Information obtained from the article by Robnett is essential to this study because it provides insight into the reasons why African American women are often forgotten about when considering the American Civil Rights Movement. This article explains the traditional roles of Black women in the Movement and explains that without a formal title, Black women are often overlooked. This explains, without excuse, the ways in which Black women have been erased from the historical understanding of the American Civil Rights Movement.

## VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to appropriately assess the role and impact of Black women in the American Civil Rights Movement. Thus, it is vital that the aforementioned research questions be answered: In what ways did the First Wave of Feminism help to impel or impede the American Civil Rights Movement? Who were the Black female leaders of the

Movement, and what is their significance in the total stage of the current understanding of Civil Rights? How can the erasure of Black women in the history of the American Civil Rights Movement be explained and, therefore, effectively reversed? While the review of literature helped to provide evidence for answers to these questions, a full analysis of the sources at large will follow to adequately form an argument surrounding Black women and the American Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement must be viewed from an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989). When viewed through this lens, it is evident that Black women often faced what is deemed by Bernice Barnett (1993) as “the triple constraint.” This triple constraint, while seen throughout American history, reached evidence first in the First Wave of Feminism (Davis, 1994). African American women were often excluded from feminist conversations, especially if they were poor or previously enslaved. While this is what began the erasure of Black women in women’s history, as well as the history of the Civil Rights Movement, this fight for involvement in women’s rights movements may have sparked within them the desire for further equality. Because of the First Wave of Feminism, the 19th Amendment was ratified which initially included voting rights for Black women rather than just White. However, this luxury was short-lived, as poll taxes and literacy tests were soon enacted, which took away voting rights from Black men and women alike. Thus, it is not an unfair assumption to say that the First Wave of Feminism both impeded and encouraged the Civil Rights Movement, primarily for Black women. While Black women were erased from both movements, it still provides authority to say that Black women helped to spark the beginning of the Movement.

Black women are often considered the “backbone” of the Movement, despite their invisibility (Gyant, 1996). This is because Black women played integral roles in Black churches,

and the beginning of the Movement was sparked within the churches due to easy communication and initial experiences of Black unity<sup>5</sup>. The spirituality explored within Black churches was one of the main motivations for Black women to join the Movement, as many believed it was their faith that gave them strength to fight (p. 637). Therefore, Black women are often cited as the backbone of the Movement because of their strength provided to them by their faith, as well as their ability to connect with those within their church. It was because of these traits that they would soon be considered the main organizers of the Civil Rights Movement (Robnett, 1996).

The average African American woman was often confined to the home and to low-paying jobs. Additionally, many women believed that it was the man's job to lead movements through speeches, physical demonstrations, whereas it was a woman's job to take care of the home and educate other women (Gyant, 1996, p. 645). Oftentimes, this forced them to adopt "womanly" roles within the Movement (Irons, 1998). This meant that they were essentially mothers to the activists on the frontlines. They provided food, shelter, and other necessities to activists, as well as educating the younger generation to fight against oppression. Furthermore, Black women were often in charge of the grassroots aspects of the Movement, as they acted as the primary bridge between organization leaders and the average working American (Robnett, 1996). This was seen as a womanly role primarily because it was the only role that was allocated specifically to women. Moreover, it was seen as womanly because it did not require the address of an organization at large and was accomplished through simple discussion. Despite the importance of these so-called womanly roles, many Black women did not see themselves as leaders; therefore, they did not recognize the vitality of resource provision and bridging (Gyant, 1996, p. 644). Thus, while this may have contributed to their erasure – which will be further analyzed later – African American women played a significant role in both growing their respective

organizations as well as providing resources for activists. Once again, Black women have proven to be a vital component of the Civil Rights Movement.

Despite their importance to the Movement, Black women have faced erasure and invisibility within the overall study of the American Civil Rights Movement. As previously mentioned, female members of the Movement themselves did not typically recognize their vitality and did not consider themselves to be leaders. This may be because they would not be the ones to address and command the organization members like the male members, which may also account for the fact that the names of specific female members are not often included when discussing the Civil Rights Movement (Barnett, 1993). Furthermore, because of their specific roles, they often lacked formal titles, unlike their male counterparts. This may be another reason why female representation in the overall understanding of the Movement is lacking. However, in Barnett's 1993 study, men were still more frequently remembered even when their position was the same as a woman's (p. 173). Oftentimes the patriarchy is cited as the main reason why Black women are forgotten and erased within the Movement, as women are usually overlooked for their contributions in favor of male contributions (p. 176). Thus, because of their lack of self-recognition, their different roles, their lack of titles, and the overall effects of the patriarchy on American history and society, Black women are erased from the history of the American Civil Rights Movement despite their numerous and indispensable contributions.

Regardless of their historical erasure, there were still plenty of Black female contributors to the American Civil Rights Movement. Female contributions, as previously stated, usually consisted of providing resources and education, like Ella Baker and Septima Clark (Barnett, 1993). However, there were also prominent authors and frontline organizers like Anne Moody and Muriel Tillinghast who were critical to the movement (Duran, 2015). While these are only a



few of the many Black women who deserve to be recognized for their work within the Civil Rights Movement, their diversity in activity as well as their inspiration to fellow members makes them especially critical to the understanding of African American women during the Movement.

## VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In spite of the erasure of Black women within the American Civil Rights Movement, an analysis of interviews and literature, as well as meta-analyses of various sources, proves that Black women were as critical to the Movement as their male counterparts. Contributions provided by Black women were motivated by various factors and differed from the contributions of White women and Black men. They participated in low-risk activism like educating the youth and providing resources, and high-risk activism, proving their devotion by putting their own lives at risk.

Thus, the overarching conclusion of this study is that Black women provided immense physical and emotional support to other activists. It is because of Black women that organizations were able to grow. It is because of Black women that the Civil Rights Movement was successful. While Black men and women of other races still played very important roles in the American Civil Rights Movement, it is unlikely that the American Civil Rights Movement would have been what it is recognized as today without the support and contributions of Black women.

## VIII. IMPLICATIONS

This study is important to the collective understanding of the American Civil Rights Movement because it explores the role of an integral group within the Movement, both because of their role within the Movement as well as the Movement's effects on the group. Black women were immediately affected by the American Civil Rights Movement, and thus it is important to investigate their contributions and perspectives to fully grasp the Movement's effects. If we seek to fully know and understand the Civil Rights Movement, we must explore all of its affected groups, whether they were direct participants or otherwise.

Through studies such as this one, we can prove the importance of women in history and society, specifically Black women. Black women and their societal contributions have been historically erased, so it is imperative to uplift their voices. Additionally, research like this proves that Black women have been and will continue to be powerful leaders. Furthermore, to undo and effectively eradicate the effects of the patriarchy on American historical studies, it is critical that female voices are heard and uplifted.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably in this study, with a preference towards “Black” when used in comparison to “White.”

<sup>2</sup> The use of the word “Movement,” purposefully stylized, is used in place of the full phrase “American Civil Rights Movement” purely for conciseness.

<sup>3</sup> The year of birth is used for certain contributors due to the nature of their contribution, as some may include first- and second-hand accounts. This is for context and to grant credibility.

<sup>4</sup> “The civil rights movement in Mississippi challenged generations of inequality in the state. Though it had much deeper roots, the Mississippi movement was especially active and creative in the early and mid-1960s, when the state became a center of national efforts to demand legal equality, voting rights for all citizens, and an end to racial segregation. When the modern civil rights movement began in the mid-twentieth century, Mississippi had the highest percentage of African American residents in the United States and the lowest percentage of African American voters.” (Ownby, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> According to John Lewis, the Black church was often an easy meeting spot for early Civil Rights organization meetings due to the importance of spirituality and the fact that the church was one of the first joyful Black-only spaces (2015).

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