HOW, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, DID THE NATURE OF CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM PERPETUATE GENDER OPPRESSION AND HINDER THE WORK OF BLACK FEMALE ACTIVISTS IN THE MOVEMENT?

Research Paper for History 344: US Social Movements

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Examining interracial relations is of great pertinence when analysing U.S. history since understanding how people of colour are perceived, as well as the difficulties that they face, today requires being aware of the long-lasting influences of slavery and segregation. The Civil Rights Movement is an important turning point in the history of the black freedom struggle, as it gave black people the chance to participate politically (through nonviolent protest) in a mass campaign to end Jim Crow. Sadly, however, the women of the movement have, for the most part, been overlooked or forgotten in the larger context of contemporary activism. At the time, they made up “a powerful, yet invisible network” vi that has continued to be “invisible” today. This lack of recognition has occurred despite that black women oftentimes carried out essential activities in propelling the movement forward. vii We can attribute this injustice to gender oppression, which was prevalent in all aspects of the movement. The perpetuation of sexism by the black church, male activist attitudes and actions towards female activists, and the male-dominated hierarchy of many civil rights groups all worked to discourage the activism that women undertook, as well as disable women from being promoted to positions of official leadership in the movement.

The role that the black church played in the Civil Rights Movement is important to assess in order to analyse why the oppression of black women within the church so greatly affected how women engaged with the movement and the roles that they took up. Religious leadership in, the values of, and the resources provided by the black church all undoubtedly had an invaluable hand in the success of the movement. For although “the black Christian tradition was not sufficient by itself; it was necessary” viii because “that is what empowered the rank and file who made the movement move. And when it moved, major legal and legislative changes occurred.” ix Much of this empowerment came from the church’s role as a space for black people to feel supported, as it acted as a “buffer against the cruelties of racism” x and “sustained [the community’s] wearied spirit when all other institutions had served contrary purposes” xi in Jim Crow society. Thus, the
black church’s subsequent position as a “nation within a nation”\textsuperscript{vii} enabled it to be a political actor and organiser in the civil rights era since “the language of the Gospel…plac[ed] black people’s struggle for justice in a familiar and beloved narrative.”\textsuperscript{viii} Indeed, in his famous letter from Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King Jr. alluded to the power religion had in fuelling civil rights activism, writing that he felt “compelled to carry the gospel of freedom.”\textsuperscript{ix} That the movement’s main leader was both himself a Reverend and expressed religion as contributing to his activism surely shows the great influence that the black church exerted in the movement.

But although the black church provided a community and resources that opposed power relations within society resulting from segregation, it also marginalised and oppressed women by suppressing and helping to obscure black women’s thought and culture. The black church led an understanding within the black community that “Black women [were] leaders and followers in various crusades to increase racial justice in society”\textsuperscript{x} purely because they “practiced racial uplift and social responsibility as a means of fulfilling what they understood as their duty to God.”\textsuperscript{xi} Such racial uplift and social responsibility derived from, respectively, the survival and liberation themes contained in the black religious culture and worldview, and called for a specific notion of civil rights activism among women that removed their individualism in what Fannie Lou Hamer referred to as “keeping down the freedom road.”\textsuperscript{xii} In addition, the black church perpetuated male supremacy by ensuring that women were kept in the background; they were “consistently given responsibilities in the kitchen, while men [were] elected or appointed to the important boards and leadership positions.”\textsuperscript{xiii} Consequently, the status of black women in the church heavily mirrored that of black women in the community, defining the nature of female activism in the movement as being inherently lesser than that which males were able to engage in, as a result of gender.

Ella Baker, one of the most prominent contemporary female civil rights activists, years later spoke extensively on the topic of female subordination within the movement, in agreement
with many other female activists of the time. Speaking on the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956, one of the most notable forms and examples of protest in the Civil Rights Movement, she noted that “all of the churches depended in terms of things taking place on women, not men. Men didn’t do the things that had to be done [while there were] a large number of women who were involved in the bus boycott.”

Activists Septima Clark and Cynthia Brown also agreed that Montgomery women “played a major role in organising the bus boycott, not just in carrying it out.” But despite that women clearly played a central role in activism, the nature of the black church obscured female contributions by emphasising male leadership since “in those days, of course, in the black church men were always in charge.” This has led to the misattribution of the bus boycott success in Montgomery entirely to Martin Luther King Jr., rather than to the multitude of women who had engaged in this type of protest long before King became involved.

Much of this misattribution also rests in the narrative of the bus boycott and Rosa Parks’ involvement in it, a narrative shaped by contemporary male church organisers and one that continues to be told today. Indeed, organisers tied to the church used Parks’ religiosity to create an image of her being “a good Christian woman and tired seamstress,” and thereby propelled the Civil Rights Movement forward by inducing sympathy for her as a passive, vulnerable woman among the community. This fable that male church organisers and activists created and preached, one of an accidental midwife without wider political engagement, de-centred Parks in the story of civil rights activism; meanwhile, King was championed as a hero and became the main leader of the movement. The reality was, as contemporary activist Ruby Nell Sales reflected, that Parks’ activism and later involvement in the boycott “went to the very heart of black womanhood.” But the church reduced Parks’ image to a passive one, and, in doing so, not only made her previous activism seem inconsequential, but also hindered her ability to participate actively in the movement after the boycott. Examples such as this one clearly show
that women faced gender oppression that the black church leaders perpetuated in organising the
movement, despite the fact that women were critical in advancing the civil rights cause.

However, the lesser status of women within the black church did not necessarily hinder
all black female activists in their civil rights agendas or trivialise the importance of their work in
the way that Parks experienced. Fannie Lou Hamer, for instance, used the prominence of the
church in black society heavily to her advantage by appealing to black southern spirituality,
through the expectation that she engaged in civil rights activism solely due to her religion. This
allowed her to affect change by politicising the black community and encouraging the pursuit of
voting rights. She believed “specific religious practices, like singing spirituals and attending
church, were part of what made churches effective for African American life.”

Since she realised the importance of the black church in creating a “nation within a nation” for a socially
oppressed black community, she used her Biblical knowledge publicly to encourage those who
were too afraid to risk registering to vote to do so. She thereby personified the connection
between black southern spirituality and civil rights, as per her expected womanly duty to God.

It is, furthermore, very clear that the way in which Hamer wielded her religiosity to
politicise people was not incidental, but rather very intentional. Paradoxically, this is obvious
because Hamer gave a few speeches that were more secular in nature, suggesting she was very
responsive as an activist to the needs of the moment. For instance, in December 1964 Hamer
gave a speech, while standing on a stage with Malcolm X, that was far more secular than
previous addresses she had delivered in church settings because her audience was not majority
Christian. But while civil rights historians know how significant Hamer’s contributions were to
the story of the black freedom struggle, most others do not since her actions are not celebrated
like are those of black male church leaders (such as Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.).
This disparity of recognition has occurred because sexist ideals, as espoused by the black church and mirrored by the wider black community, meant that gender oppression existed in the sphere of civil rights activism. Contemporary black religious theology did not consider sexism as one of the oppressive realities of the black community and thus also within the black church, even though “men monopolised the ministry as a profession [and] the ministry of women as fully ordained clergyman [was] always controversial. The Black church fathers were unable to see the injustices of their own practices, even when they paralleled the injustices of the white church against which they rebelled.”\textsuperscript{xxii} The consequent existence of a male superiority complex in the church and thus also in society obscured the relevance of black female activism. While it is ironic, it is certainly the case that black male ministers passionately preached the message of liberation in the gospel when related to racism, but remained ignorant to a similar message in the context of sexism.

The unchallenged existence of sexism within the black church led male activists and civil rights leaders to view female activists as a behind-the-scenes support system, and thus as being less capable than male activists were. Religiously based ideological ambivalence about women’s roles meant that black women in the community were likewise “not only…rewarded for performance in ‘backbone’ or supportive positions, but [were] penalised for trying to move from the backbone to the head position.”\textsuperscript{xxiii} It is important to consider the distinction between prescribed support positions and policymaking leadership positions so that we might see the oppression of black women in the black church as clearly as possible, and determine how male perceptions of women’s roles in the church may have spilt over into their roles in activism.

Baker makes this connection by describing her own experience having to deal with ministers “whose only [prior] sense of relationship to women in organisation was that of the church. And the role of women in the southern church…was that of doing the things that the
minister said he wanted to have done. It was not one in which [women] were credited with having creativity and initiative and capacity to carry out things."xxiv Baker’s words here are very important to note since her experience as a prominent activist is surely indicative of the wider experience of female activists of the era more generally. The lack of desire that she describes among male activists to designate any form of authority or reward to female activists makes it unsurprising that women like Baker were seen as incidental, rather than essential, actors in the sphere of the movement, and held backbone roles that reflected this.

Indeed, a position paper entitled ‘Women of the Movement’ was submitted anonymously in November 1964 at a meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that outlined the sexist discrimination that female activists of the Civil Rights Movement faced each day. The authors, later identified as white female activists Mary King and Casey Hayden, noted that “many women [of the movement], in order to be accepted by men, on men’s terms, [gave] themselves up to that caricature of what a woman is – unthinking, pliable, an ornament to please the man.”xxv This was not to say that women did not contribute meaningfully to civil rights activism, for they were “the crucial factor that [kept] the movement running on a day-to-day basis;”xxvi however, they were “not given equal say-so when it [came] to day-to-day decisionmaking.”xxvii These two women a year later also wrote another document, ‘A Kind of Memo,’ which they circulated to female activists across the United States. This paper drew parallels between gender and racial oppression as well as linked the idea of the sexist society women experienced to a caste system – an abhorrent system in an era of civil rights.xxviii

While it is important to note that these two documents were written by white women, and so may not be wholly reflective of the black female experience, they still provide crucial evidence since these women were SNCC activists who saw first-hand and, in their writing, explicitly recognised the pertinence of the black freedom struggle. From these documents, it is
clear that sexist attitudes among men towards women in the community spilled over into all facets of activist work; “the caste system perspective dictate[d] the roles assigned to women in the movement…[and] problems [arose] between women with varying degrees of awareness of themselves as being as capable as men but held back from full participation.”

Moreover, both papers refer to the usual response among men to allegations of sexism within the Civil Rights Movement and wider society as being either defensive and/or one of laughter, since “the whole idea [was] either beyond their comprehension or threaten[ed] and expos[ed] them.” The fact that the authors felt that they had to submit the 1964 document anonymously because they feared having to otherwise suffer “insinuations, ridicule, [and] over-exaggerated compensations” goes further to show how pervasive sexism was within the movement and the extent to which male activists did not care for their female counterparts to be their equals.

It is definitely also worth noting that other female activists shared these experiences, which validates the claims that King and Hayden made in their two papers. Septima Clark recounted a similar experience where she sent a letter asking Martin Luther King Jr. to pursue a grassroots method of participatory democracy (rather than leading all the marches himself), a letter which King read before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) staff and which “just tickled them…they just laughed.” She also felt that the men on the executive staff of SCLC didn’t respect her opinion as they “didn’t have any faith in women, none whatsoever…they just thought that women were sex symbols and had no contribution to make.” Such an unsupportive environment for female activists certainly didn’t allow women to feel respected in their work. Gwendolyn Simmons, a member of SNCC, noted in an interview how hard it was to be a female civil rights activist in the organisation due to how toxic its sexist work culture was, for not only was it “a struggle to be taken seriously by the leadership, as well as by male colleagues…but there was [also] sexual harassment that often happened towards the
women.”xxxiv There is thus a plethora of evidence that points to explicit sexist attitudes towards women by male leaders and activists within the movement and at the heart of activism itself.

Despite this evidence, some might point to the degree of complacency that existed among some black female activists to the issue of sexism and gender oppression within the movement. Some women appeared either to see male supremacy in the black church (and, consequently, in the black community) as unimportant or to not see any obvious oppression in their own activist experience and thereby conclude that it did not exist at all. One SNCC member, Jean Wheeler Smith, rebuked King and Hayden’s claims that gender oppression existed in SNCC, claiming that she “had so much freedom to decide how [she] was going to work and so much support for [her] decisions that [she] never felt this sense of limitation that people seem[ed] to be referring to…[men] had titles, but titles didn’t matter.”xxxv From recollections of experiences such as this one, some could argue gender oppression was not as pervasive a problem as it appeared to be from the vantage point of the aforementioned black female activists – Baker, Clark, and others.

But, as the black church perpetuated a social norm that oppressed women and encouraged sexist attitudes towards them, many black women actually began “to believe in their own inferiority… and the innate superiority of the powerful [male leaders].”xxxvi In this way, the church and society had emphasised and made normal the idea of male-dominated hierarchical structures within civil rights organisations. This social norm may have contributed to Smith’s feeling of not feeling limited by her gender; perhaps she did not inherently believe that women had much more to give to the movement, even if their ability to contribute was less extensive than that of men. Because, contrary to what Smith claimed, having a title in an organisation like SNCC very much did matter in terms of giving an activist an official leadership position that opened up the potential for stronger recognition of their activist work. Smith’s deference towards titles thus likely indicates that she never reached a high enough position in SNCC where she
would have felt first-hand the disparity in how leaders of the movement perceived male and female ability, and thus the need to further facilitate or recognise their work, as activists.

Ella Baker, however, certainly experienced a great degree of resistance from her male activist counterparts with regards to her prominence in civil rights activism. Her inability to attain a leadership role in the SCLC, for instance, despite the fact that she helped found and set up the organisation, indicates that this was the case. In an interview in 1974, Baker reflected that “although [she] had full responsibility for doing whatever was being done [she] was never offered a position, an official position, by way of title.” The SCLC executive staff justified this discrimination by suggesting that the only people appropriate to be leaders of the SCLC were ministers; however, Baker knew that her gender in itself was what hugely contributed to her inability to gain an official position of leadership, in addition to the fact that, as a woman, she could not be a minister even if she had desired. When asked why she never actually sought a position as executive director of the SCLC, she answered that she “knew it was not to be [for] two reasons. One, [she] was a female. The other, [she] guess[ed], a combination of female and non-minister.” Undoubtedly, Baker’s feelings on the fact that sexism constrained her ability to fully realise her potential and affect the community in her activism were incredibly strong.

Many other activists also questioned why women were constantly overlooked for leadership roles within civil rights organisations. Although the majority of these activists were women themselves, some male activists also expressed confusion in this regard. Lonnie King, for instance, an activist within SNCC in Atlanta, was surprised that Diane Nash was not elected to be Nashville representative when SNCC became a nationwide organisation in 1960. He felt that, “in [his] view, [she] was the Nashville movement…others were there, but they weren’t Diane Nash.” He went further to note that “except maybe for sexism, [he] never understood how” male activists James Bevel, Marion Barry, and John Lewis were selected for leadership roles
over Nash, leaving her “a real unsung hero of the movement in Nashville.”\textsuperscript{xlii} That even a male activist, in a society that encouraged male superiority and made normal female oppression, felt baffled by the degree of sexism in civil rights activism indicates just how pervasive it truly was.

Gender oppression within both the black church and society played an unquestionably large role in inhibiting the type of work that female activists carried out in the Civil Rights Movement, as well as how much recognition these women were able to achieve for their work. Much of this sexist culture stemmed from the position and perception of women within the black church, a culture which strongly defined the experience of black women within society. This was due to the church’s role as a safe haven for the black community in an era of Jim Crow, and, consequently, as a central organiser in the movement. Because many civil rights leaders were directly affiliated with the black church, such as Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and only men could become ministers, the expectations of women within the church were reflected in how the majority of male activists, and also some women, regarded the activism of their female counterparts in the movement; while an emphasis was placed on male leadership, women were expected to take up more supportive roles. Blatantly unequal consideration among men of the activism that women carried out led to an environment that discouraged, or even disabled, women from being able to fully engage with the movement and attain their full potential as activists. Therefore, in the way that women felt unable to attain meaningful roles in the movement, it is clear that gender oppression both existed at all levels of civil rights activism, and that this deeply hindered the work of black female activism.

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iv Ibid., p. 7.
viii Ibidem.

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xiii Grant, Jacquelyn. “Black Women and the Church.” In Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Eds.) *All Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. The Feminist Press, 1982, p. 145.
xiv Baker, Ella. Interview by Eugene Walker.
xxiii Grant, “Black Women and the Church,” p. 142.
xxiv Baker, Ella. Interview by Eugene Walker.
xxvi Ibidem.
xxvii Ibidem.
xxix Ibidem.
xxx Ibidem.
xxxiii Ibidem.


Baker, Ella. Interview by Eugene Walker.

Ibidem.

Ibidem.


Ibidem.

Ibidem.