



Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement

Introduction

Who comes to mind when considering the Modern Civil Rights Movement (MCRM) during 1954 - 1965? Is it one of the big three personalities: Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Rosa Parks? Or perhaps it is John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael, James Baldwin, Thurgood Marshall, Ralph Abernathy, or Medgar Evers. What about the names of Septima Poinsette Clark, Ella Baker, Diane Nash, Daisy Bates, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ruby Bridges, or Claudette Colvin? What makes the two groups different? Why might the first group be more familiar than the latter? A brief look at one of the most visible events during the MCRM, the March on Washington, can help shed light on this question.

On August 28, 1963, over 250,000 men, women, and children of various classes, ethnicities, backgrounds, and religions beliefs journeyed to Washington D.C. to march for civil rights. The goals of the March included a push for a comprehensive civil rights bill, ending segregation in public schools, protecting voting rights, and protecting employment discrimination. The March produced one of the most iconic speeches of the MCRM, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and helped paved the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

While the March advocated equality for African Americans in American society, the March was not progressive for gender equality and was dominated by men. The formal program initially excluded any prominent women of the MCRM from speaking at the March. Anna Arnold Hedgeman, the sole woman on the Administrative Committee of the March, protested the lack of women. In response, A. Philip Randolph, the March's organizer, and the male leadership, which included the "Big Six" (A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, John Lewis, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young) decided to add women in a short, rushed, "Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom". Furthermore, women were not included in the delegation that met with President Kennedy later that afternoon. The March on Washington highlights the sexism toward and marginalization of women within the MCRM.

Research Questions to Consider

Who were some of the women leaders of the Modern Civil Rights Movement in your local town, city or state?

What were the expected gender roles in 1950s - 1960s America? Did these roles vary in different racial and ethnic communities? How would these gender roles effect the MCRM?

Who were the "Big Six" of the MCRM? What were their individual views toward women in the movement?

How were the ideas of gender similar or different with the MCRM and the later Black Power Movement?

How did African American women in the MCRM relate to women in other movements of the era (ex. Chicano, LGBT, or American Indian Movement)?





Women were the backbone of the MCRM from small towns to the national movement. Women played a crucial role as strategists and advocates. They participated despite the dangers including violence, homelessness, unemployment, sexual assault, and death. Exploring the MCRM beyond its familiar narrative will highlight the conflicts, compromises, and complexities that allows for a greater understanding of the MCRM. This exploration will rightly acknowledge the contribution of the many women whose blood, sweat, tears, and dedication helped gain civil rights.

(Some) Women of the Movement:

Septima Poinsette Clark (1898 – 1987)

Septima Poinsette Clark was an educator from South Carolina who developed the Citizenship Schools at the Highlander Folk School, and later through the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). The Citizenship Schools taught and encouraged African Americans to learn and harness the power of literacy, education, and civics to gain their civil rights and empower their communities.

Diane Nash (1938 –)

While attending Fisk University in 1959, Diane Nash involved herself in the fledgling civil rights movement in Nashville, Tennessee. By 1960, she was one of the most well-known and respected student leaders in the city. She was crucial in organizing the Nashville sit-ins. She also helped sustain the Freedom Rides through the Deep South. Nash was a leader in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee).

Fannie Lou Hamer (1917 – 1977)

Fannie Lou Hamer fought for civil rights in rural Mississippi, actively challenging the racist status quo by pushing for desegregation and African American voter registration. She was one the leaders of the 1964 Freedom Summer Campaign, which battled white supremacy, segregation, and racial violence in Mississippi. She also co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to integrate African Americans into the state's Democratic Party.

Dorothy Height (1912 – 2010)

Dorothy Height was known as the “Godmother of the Civil Rights Movement” because of her extensive involvement in the fight for civil rights since the 1930s. Early in her activist career, Height met Mary McLeod Bethune at a New York YMCA and became her protégé. Height would come to help organize events during the MCRM, such as the 1963 March on Washington. She influenced leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis. She was a pioneer in the use of political organization, and strongly advocated for women’s rights in the United States and worldwide.

Ella Baker (1903 – 1986)

In April 1960, Ella Baker was essential in organizing the founding conference of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. She persuaded Martin Luther King Jr. to invest in the conference. SNCC would help to cultivate the energies of young people around the nation ready and willing to involve themselves in the MCRM.

Angela Davis (1944 –)

In 1963, Angela Davis joined the MCRM after the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that killed four young girls. Davis would be better-known for her participation in the Black Power Movement, Black Panther Party, and the American Communist Party in California.



Coretta Scott King (1927 – 2006)

Influenced by her parents, Coretta Scott King pursued a musical education at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She encountered discrimination and segregation during her studies, which prompted her to join the local NAACP chapter. In 1953, she married Martin Luther King Jr., and suddenly was at the forefront of the MCRM. She continued her quest for civil rights, in the United States and internationally, while being a supportive wife and mother. After her husband's assassination in 1965, she continued her legacy (and his) for civil rights by founding the MLK Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

Daisy Bates (1914 – 1999)

Daisy Bates was active in the Civil Rights Movement in Arkansas. She and her husband published a weekly paper that advocated for African American civil rights, *The Arkansas Press*. She was instrumental in desegregating schools in the state immediately after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. She mentored, supported and organized the nine students, also known as the "Little Rock Nine", selected to integrate Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

McCree Harris (1934 – 2000)

McCree Harris was part of the Civil Rights Movement in Albany, Georgia. As an educator at Monroe Comprehensive High School, she urged young people to get involved in the MCRM. She was also part of the Freedom Singers. The Freedom Singers used music to raise funds for SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and educate about events during the MCRM.

Shirley Sherrod (1948 –)

Shirley Sherrod became active in the MCRM after her father was shot to death by a white farmer in 1965. She was an organizer for the SNCC Southwest Georgia Project along with her husband, Charles Sherrod. Through the Southwest Georgia Project, she strongly advocated for African American land ownership and land retention.

Johnnie Carr (1911 – 2008)

Johnnie Carr was politically active in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1931, she raised money for the nine young African American men wrongly accused in the Scottsboro Trials. Later, through her NAACP chapter, she became involved with the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. Carr was instrumental in working "behind-the-scenes" to organize the 13-month boycott. In 1964, she and her husband filed a suit against the Montgomery County Board of Education for their son to attend the all-white Sidney Lanier High School. They won their case in 1969.

Thelma Glass (1916 – 2012)

Thelma Glass was a geography professor at Alabama State University, and part of the Women's Political Council in Montgomery, Alabama. The council was critical in organizing the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Georgia Gilmore (1920 – 1990)

Georgia Gilmore used her talents in cooking and as a restaurateur to help support the movement in Montgomery, Alabama. She participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and was fired from her job because of her participation. She opened a restaurant in her home, which became a safe space for local civil rights leaders. Also, she formed the Club From Nowhere, which consisted of African American women cooking and selling cakes and pies to black and white customers. The money went to support efforts in the bus boycott.



Ruby Dee (1922 – 2014)

Ruby Dee was a film and Broadway actress who, along with her husband Ossie Davis, was active in supporting the MRCM through the arts. She and her husband challenged the negative stereotypes and subservient roles of African American on Broadway and in film. Dee and Davis took non-traditional lead roles for African Americans and wrote positive portrayals of African Americans in their works. She starred in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and helped found the Association of Artists for Freedom in 1963.

Jo Ann Robinson (1912 – 1992)

Jo Ann Robinson was a teacher in Montgomery, Alabama, who became involved in the MCRM after being verbally attacked by a white bus driver in 1949. Under her leadership, the Women's Political Council focused their efforts on organizing and supporting the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She also helped to organize the Montgomery Improvement Association, a grassroots organization that fought for civil rights and bus desegregation. It was the first black civil rights organization to operate outside of the NAACP.

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons (1944 –)

As a student at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, Gwendolyn Simmons became active in the Student Non-Violent Registration Committee despite warnings from her parents and the college. She participated in the Freedom Summer of 1964 by building schools in Mississippi. During the 1960s, she worked in Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama to get African Americans registered to vote.

Ruby Bridges (1954 –)

At six years old, Ruby Bridges was the first African American child to integrate schools in Louisiana. On Ruby's first day, she and her mother, escorted by U.S. Marshals, endured taunts and threats as she approached Johnson Lockett Elementary in New Orleans. Only one white teacher was willing to teach Ruby, and she was the only child in her kindergarten class due to racism. Ruby was unable to eat lunch in the cafeteria or go to recess alone because of the danger of violence toward her. Ruby Bridges never missed a day of school.

Claudette Colvin (1935 –)

Nine months before Rosa Parks, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin resisted giving up her seat on a crowded Montgomery bus for a white passenger. Her actions were the inspiration for the planned protest conducted by Rosa Parks later that year. Claudette Colvin's testimony in *Gayle v. Browder* (1956), which was about the segregated Montgomery buses, helped to end transportation segregation in the state.

Josephine Baker (1906 – 1975)

Josephine Baker was a famous film and Broadway actress of the 1920s. In 1925, she continued her success on the stage when she moved to France. Baker became a resistant fighter in France during the Second World War (1939 - 1945). After the war, continued to live, travel, and perform between Europe and the United States. Baker refused to perform in front of segregated crowds or where she was refused hospitality. She worked with the NAACP during the MCRM. She was the only female speaker at the March on Washington in 1963.

Secondary and Primary Text Resources:

Secondary:

- Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954 – 63*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.
- Branch, Taylor. *Pillar of Fire: American in the King Years: 1963 – 1965*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 91. no. 4 (Mar. 2005): 1233-1263.
- Olson, Lynne. *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.
- Barnett, Bernie McNair. "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class." *Gender and Society* 7, no. 2 (Jun. 1993): 162-182.

Primary

- Holsaert, Faith S., Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner. *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Houck, David W., and David E. Dixon. *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954 -1965*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
- "Civil Rights History Project." *The National Museum of African American History*.
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/civil-rights-history-project>.

NMAAHC Resources:



All items and images are part of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, unless otherwise noted.

To find these resources and more information, visit: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/collection>

List of Resources:

- 1) A somber Mrs. Coretta Scott King entering into Ebenezer Baptist Church (Gift of Horace C. Henry)
- 2) *Walking* by Charles Henry Alston (Gift of Sydney Smith Gordon)
- 3) Program from March on Washington (Gift of Samuel Y. Edgerton)
- 4) Photograph of women activists with signs for voter registration (Frances Albrier Collection)
- 5) Pin-back button for CORE's Freedom Rides (Gift from Dawn Simon Spears and Alvin Spears, Sr.)
- 6) Outfit worn by Carlotta Walls to Little Rock Central High School (Gift of Carlotta Walls LaNier)

Main Page Photo Banner (Left to Right):

- A) Diane Nash (Courtesy of the National Archives)
- B) Rosa Parks (Courtesy of Library of Congress)
- C) Fannie Lou Hamer (© The Louis Draper Archive)
- D) Dorothy Height (Courtesy of Library of Congress)
- E) Septima Clark (Courtesy of Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston)
- F) Daisy Bates (Public Domain)
- G) Ella Baker (Courtesy of Library of Congress)
- H) Coretta Scott King (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Pages 2 - 5 Photo Banner: Photograph of women activists with signs for voter registration (Frances Albrier Collection)