



# Women in the Civil Rights Movement: SCLC and SNCC

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the participation of women in the Civil Rights Movement, focusing on their roles in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The author's goal was to show, through the use of a comparative analysis approach, that even though women were treated unequally at times during the Civil Rights Movement, including by the prominent SCLC, they were empowered by their participation in youth-oriented organizations such as the SNCC. This difference between the two groups is due to the essential variation in their organization structure. SNCC employs a group-centered, non-patriarchal organization, in contrast to the SCLC, which is hampered by its centralization of authority; this gave more opportunities for leadership and promoted a more friendly environment for women. This comparison aims to explore future organizing methods for sexual equality.

**Keyword:** Women the Civil Rights Movement SNCC SCLC

## 1 Introduction

“We need to make sure we’re creating spaces to create new leaders and new types of leadership” [1]. This observation was expressed by civil rights icon and Black Lives Matter (BLM) co-founder Alicia Garza, who realized the need to prioritize women’s leadership and committed to bring marginalized groups closer to the center. BLM has had many female leaders, and some have seen this as a rejection of the patriarchal civil rights movement of the 1960s. It seems to be a common conception that before BLM, the black liberation movement was primarily male-dominated and lack of women’s voices. However, Was the 1960s movement truly masculinized? In some circles, of course: Dr. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was a patriarchal, Christian organization. But the SCLC was not the civil rights movement. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a more radical student-led organization, embraced a more egalitarian structure and encouraged more women to step forward and fought for their rights, just as SNCC field secretary Jean Wheeler Smith remembered, “SNCC was a liberating experience for me. In the SNCC I knew the message was: ‘Do whatever you are big enough to do’” [2]. In this essay, the author believes that though women were treated unequally at times throughout the civil rights movement, including the renowned SCLC, they were empowered through their participation in youth-oriented organizations such as the SNCC.

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## 2 Context

SNCC was founded in 1960 in response to student-led sit-ins at Greensboro's segregated lunch counters by Ella Baker who, unlike other prominent adult leaders at the time, encouraged students to form their independent organization. It flourished, pushing its young talent to the limit, and was swiftly recognized as the driving force behind collegiate participation in the civil rights movement. Women were in the vanguard of these fights, and their influence could be seen in several noteworthy occurrences, including Freedom Rides, many sit-ins, and voter resignations. As Esteemed American historian Howard Zinn has noted, "youngsters, for the first time in our history," are at the forefront of a significant social movement that has the capacity to effect radical change [3].

There had been significant debate over the position of women and the perceived patriarchy in the civil rights movement. Some historians, like Dr. Dennis Urban, claimed that women were "often assigned clerical tasks and menial works" [4], which were recognized as stereotypical female jobs, and prohibited from taking leadership positions. Other historians, like Charles Payne, however, had various views on what constitutes leadership. For example, Payne's research on the role of women in the Mississippi Delta's civil rights struggle suggested that "men led, but women organized" [5]. Professor Barnett had also noted that it is essential to regard Baker's and other Black women's organizing efforts as "valid leadership roles," particularly those of "working-class women at grass root level" [6]. In this paper, I will agree with Professor Barnett that "organizing is one important leadership role" [7] and further explain that, in general, women were encouraged to "do whatever they are big enough to do" in the movement [8]. This was not to deny the existing problems of sexism [9], but at the same time acknowledged that women were granted a position in the civil rights movement, particularly in SNCC, which "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 organizations," like SCLC [10].

The comparison approach offers a potent tool to support the claim that SNCC was female-friendly. I will start by discussing the drawbacks of SCLC, following up by the distinct features of SNCC, which are supported by experiences of Ella Baker, Septima Poinsette Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Victoria Grey, Freedom Summer Volunteer recruitment statistics, and examinations of the primary images from the Freedom Summer Digital Collection.

SCLC, in the 1960s, was predominantly a male-dominated organization due to the low percentage of contemporary female clergies in the U.S. (2.3%) [11]. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as its name suggests, is primarily composed of Baptist ministers who are centered around the inspirational leader Martin Luther King Jr. The SCLC's progress was somewhat hampered by this structure, which constrained its actions to those of Martin Luther King Jr. Charles E. Cobb, the well-known journalist, noted that "the decisions that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference made have in part to do with what Reverend King needed to maintain and sustain his image, and then what the SCLC needed to sustain Martin Luther King" [12]. This is not to dismiss Martin Luther King Jr.'s contribution to the movement, but it should be acknowledged that the presence of a man of his stature would impede the growth of other members. Septima Poinsette Clark had pleaded in a letter to Dr. King asking for the development of more

diverse leadership, yet the staff “just laughed” [13]. It could be inferred that King’s charisma was so compelling that any act to remove him from the core or any attempt to create a novel position in the core was considered treachery. SNCC, in contrast, applied a group-centered leadership structure, which offered more opportunity and leadership roles open to women. Moreover, its applications of the grass-root structuring ensured its focus on people rather than individuals, creating a more female-friendly atmosphere. The experiences of many female members, such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Victoria Gray, are in support of this claim.

Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Bob Moses created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in [14] to encourage Black political involvement and challenge the validity of the pro-segregation Democratic Party in Mississippi. Fannie Lou Hamer assumed a number of “male-typical leadership responsibilities” She delivered a broadcast address at the Democratic Party’s national convention in Atlantic City, protesting against racial discrimination in the South. The speech garnered widespread attention.

In Fig. 1, a television set displays an image of Fannie Lou Hamer speaking into microphones. Her entire body was hunching forward, demonstrating a connection with the audience. She was talking. Her mouth was open, and where came her clear and strong voice, advocating for awareness and change. During her testimony, She questioned the committee, “Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephone off the hook because our lives are threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?” [15]. Her courage to act and her words of strength made her everything a charismatic leader could be, and over



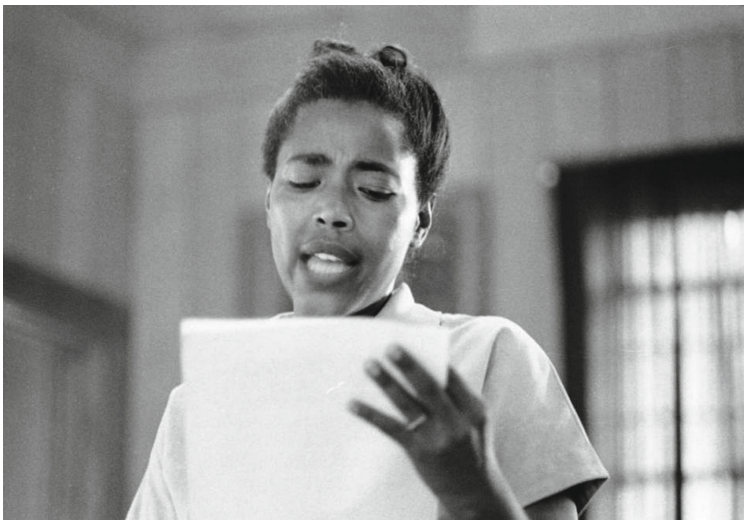
**Fig. 1.** Fannie Lou Hamer on Television [14]. Note: Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Records, 1962–1971

time, she contributed to the change in politics on all levels by persuading Mississippi to grant voting rights to African Americans.

Fannie Lou Hamer's experience with SNCC showed the organization's respect towards talented and powerful youth, regardless of their gender. Furthermore, as the co-founder of MFDP and an SNCC organizer, Hamer was recognized as a true leader in SNCC, rather than being "only considered "supportive" of the leadership that was provided by the men" in SCLC [16].

Figure 2 shows the scene of Victoria Gray, an SNCC field secretary, at an MFDP meeting in Hattiesburg [17]. She was standing while reading, albeit subtly, from her notes. Her facial expressions convey a struggle, sorrow, sincerity, and strength that hint at her understanding of the subject and resolve to effect change. Ms. Gray was a prominent member of the MFDP, and it is clear from this photo that she gave her all to the organization and undoubtedly had a voice in SNCC. Her progress in SNCC was also remarkable. In 1962, Victoria Gray acted as a liaison between the neighborhood and SNCC; in [14], she joined the ranks of the MFDP leaders. She later became the first Mississippian woman to seek senator. Her experience with SNCC not only reinforced the claim that SNCC is women-friendly and open to various forms of leadership, but also verified that females are encouraged to develop and progress in the group. For many women like Ms. Gray, joining SNCC "was like coming home" [18].

SCLC, in addition to its reluctance of training new leaders, held a contemptuous attitude toward women. Ella Baker, who almost single-handedly organized SCLC's Atlanta office, was recognized as the "interim executive secretary" because the male leaders in SCLC were unwilling to name a woman as the formal executive secretary [19]. Ella Baker stated herself that she would never be granted a leadership role in SCLC, as "First, [she is] a woman. Also, [she is] not a minister." She added that women is usually expected to "[take] orders, not providing leadership." in churches [20]. This was not



**Fig. 2.** Victoria Jackson Gray Randall (Herbert) Freedom Summer Photographs [17].

**Table 1.** Status on the Summer Project by Gender (%) [Owner-draw].

Gender	All Applicants	Rejects	No-Shows	Volunteers
Male	59	48	52	62
Female	41	52	48	38

a sole experience, as Ms. Clark had also recalled Reverend Abernathy and Dr. King's discontentment of her designing and operating a program as a women. "Well, I just can't see why you have got to have her on the board!", they said. "They just didn't feel... a woman... Had any sense" [21].

SNCC, on the other hand, in general offered women a fair treatment, which could be reflected from its recruitment process. During the Freedom Summer Campaign, potential volunteers were required to complete applicants, providing relevant information on their volunteering motivations, prior civil rights involvement, and organizational connections. Volunteers were either accepted or rejected based on these information.

The rejection rates are 48% for male and 52% for women, as shown in Table 1, which are roughly even. Even though there is a gap between female and males in the actual participation rates, the SNCC recruitment process could still be recognized as unbiased and unaffected by gender factors [22].

### 3 Conclusion

This comparative case illustrates the diverse experiences women had during the civil rights movement. Although Ella Baker and Septima Poinsette Clark's experiences with the SCLC were unpleasant, Fannie Lou Hamer and Victoria Gray gained experience and occupied leadership roles inside the SNCC. SNCC's recruitment process was also unaffected by gender, highlighting the organization's efforts to prevent unjust treatment of women. The organizational structures of SCLC and SNCC determined the differences between the two organizations. Unlike the SCLC, which was constrained by its centralization of power, the SNCC utilized a group-centered and non-patriarchal structure, which provided more opportunities for leadership and fostered a rather welcoming environment for women. This comparison could aid in the development of a more equitable, transparent, and efficient organization.

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