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## Civil Rights History Project

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# Women in the Civil Rights Movement

Many women played important roles in the Civil Rights Movement, from leading local civil rights organizations to serving as lawyers on school segregation lawsuits. Their efforts to lead the movement were often overshadowed by men, who still get more attention and credit for its successes in popular historical narratives and commemorations. Many women experienced gender discrimination and sexual harassment within the movement and later turned towards the feminist movement in the 1970s. The Civil Rights History Project interviews with participants in the struggle include both expressions of pride in women's achievements and also candid assessments about the difficulties they faced within the movement.

[Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons](#) was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and one of three women chosen to be a field director for the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. She discusses the difficulties she faced in this position and notes that gender equality was not a given, but had to be fought for: "I often had to struggle around issues related to a woman being a project director. We had to fight for the resources, you know. We had to fight to get a good car because the guys would get first dibs on everything, and that wasn't fair...it was a struggle to be taken seriously by the leadership, as well as by your male colleagues." She continues, "One of the things that we often don't talk about, but there was sexual harassment that often happened toward the women. And so, that was one of the things that, you know, I took a stand on, that 'This was not – we're not going to get a consensus on this. There is not going to be sexual harassment of any of the women on this project or any of the women in this community. And you will be put out if you do it.'"

[Lonnie King](#) was an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Atlanta. He remembers meeting other students from the Nashville movement when SNCC became a nationwide organization in 1960. He recalls his surprise that Diane Nash was not elected to be the representative from Nashville, and echoes Simmons' criticisms about male privilege and domination: "Diane Nash, in my view, *was* the Nashville movement and by that I mean this: Others were there, but

they weren't Diane Nash. Diane was articulate; she was a beautiful woman, very photogenic, very committed. And very intelligent and had a following. I never did understand how, except maybe for sexism, I never understood how [James] Bevel, Marion [Barry], and for that matter, John Lewis, kind of leapfrogged over her. I never understood that because she was in fact the leader in Nashville. It was Diane. The others were followers of her... I so never understood that to be honest with you. She's an unsung... a real unsung hero of the movement in Nashville, in my opinion."

[Ekwueme Michael Thewell](#) was a student at Howard University and a leader of the Nonviolent Action Group, an organization that eventually joined with SNCC. He reflects on the sacrifices that women college students at Howard made in joining the struggle, and remarks on the constraints they faced after doing so: "It is only in retrospect that I recognize the extraordinary price that our sisters paid for being as devoted to the struggle as they were. It meant that they weren't into homecoming queen kind of activities. That they weren't into the accepted behavior of a Howard lady. That they weren't into the trivia of fashion and dressing up. Though they were attractive women and they took care of themselves, but they weren't the kind of trophy wives for the med school students and they weren't—some of them might have been members of the Greek letter organizations, but most of them I suspect weren't. So that they occupied a place outside the conventional social norms of the whole university student body. So did the men. But with men, I think, we can just say, 'Kiss my black ass' and go on about our business. It wasn't so clear to me that a woman could do the same thing."

Older interviewees emphasize the opportunities that were available to an earlier generation of women. [Mildred Bond Roxborough](#), a long-time secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, discusses the importance of women leaders in local branches: "Well, actually when you think about women's contributions to the NAACP, without the women we wouldn't have an NAACP. The person who was responsible for generating the organizing meeting was a woman. Of course, ever since then we've had women in key roles--not in the majority, but in the very key roles which were responsible for the evolution of the NAACP. I think in terms of people like Daisy Lampkin, who was a member of our national board from Pittsburgh; she traveled around the country garnering memberships and helping to organize branches. That was back in the '30s and '40s before it became fashionable or popular for women to travel. You have women who subsequently held positions in the NAACP nationally as program directors and as leaders of various divisions." She goes on to discuss the contributions of many women to the success of the NAACP.

[Doris Adelaide Derby](#), another SNCC activist, remembers that the challenge and urgency of the freedom struggle was a formative experience for young activist women, who had to learn resourcefulness on the job: "I always did what I wanted to do. I had my own inner drive. And I found that when I came up with ideas and I was ready to work to see it through, and I think that happened with a lot of women in SNCC. We needed all hands on deck, and so, when we found ourselves in situations, we had to rely on whoever was around. And if somebody had XYZ skills, and somebody only had ABC, we had to come together. We used to joke about that, but in reality, the women, you know, were strong. In the struggle, the women were strong."

[Ruby Nell Sales](#), who later overcame psychological traumas from the racial violence she witnessed in

the movement, encourages us to look beyond the simplistic story of Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery. As she explains, Parks was a long-time activist who had sought justice for African American women who were frequently assaulted—both verbally and physically-- in their daily lives: "...When we look at Rosa Parks, people often think that she was – she did that because of her civil rights and wanting to sit down on the bus. But she also did that – it was a rebellion of maids, a rebellion of working class women, who were tired of boarding the buses in Montgomery, the public space, and being assaulted and called out-of-there names and abused by white bus drivers. And that's why that Movement could hold so long. If it had just been merely a protest about riding the bus, it might have shattered. But it went to the very heart of black womanhood, and black women played a major role in sustaining that movement."

The Civil Rights History Project includes interviews with over 50 women who came from a wide range of backgrounds and were involved in the movement in a myriad of ways. Their stories deepen our understanding of the movement as a whole, and provide us with concrete examples of how vital they were to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.