How Did Black Women Leaders Contribute to the Successes of the Civil Rights Movement?

By: Quill.org
Adapted by Fishtank Staff

1 Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, John Lewis—many Americans recognize the names of these leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. But Ella Baker, Diane Nash, and Fannie Lou Hamer? Those names might not be as familiar.

2 Baker, Nash, and Hamer are just a few of the many Black women whose leadership was instrumental to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. Activists today find inspiration in these women's stories. Yet Black women who were leaders in the Civil Rights Movement have largely not been given the same attention as Black men. What roles did these women play, why have their efforts been largely overlooked, and what has been their lasting impact?

Black Women's Roles in the Civil Rights Movement

3 For decades after the end of the Civil War, Black Americans continued to face discrimination and violence: racial barriers prevented them from voting, segregation denied them equal access to public spaces, and white Americans faced little to no consequences for racially motivated hate crimes. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black Americans fought to end these injustices and secure their civil rights, or the rights of all people to freedom and equality. Their hard-fought successes included laws like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. These laws made certain forms of race-based discrimination illegal and provided more civil rights protections for Black Americans and other marginalized groups.

4 Many Black women were central to these accomplishments. One important leader was Ella Baker, often called a "mother of the Civil Rights Movement." Baker was a community organizer, meaning that she empowered everyday people to form groups so that they can accomplish their political goals. In 1960, Baker encouraged the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a group of student activists that became extremely important to the movement. Through the SNCC, Baker mentored many young people who went on to become leaders themselves.

5 One of these mentees was Diane Nash. While a student at Fisk University in Tennessee, Nash became a student leader in the Nashville sit-ins of 1960. These sit-ins were non-violent protests where Black students sat at lunch counters that only served white people. Despite facing arrests and violent attacks, the young protesters remained peaceful, with new students quickly taking the places of those who were arrested. Due to the pressure of these sit-ins, Nashville began desegregating lunch counters that year, meaning that they would serve all races at the same lunch counter. The success of the Nashville sit-ins inspired other demonstrations and showed that young people could use non-violent protests to enact change.

6 During this same time, Fannie Lou Hamer fought to expand political representation for Black Americans. Born in 1917 to a lower-income family in rural Mississippi, Hamer didn't learn about her legal right to vote until she was 44. After experiencing discrimination and violence for trying to register, she became determined to help other Black Americans exercise their voting rights. Hamer organized voter registration drives in Mississippi and throughout the South. In 1964, after the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party refused to allow Black Americans to become involved in the party, Hamer cofounded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party with Ella Baker and Bob Moses. Her activism was instrumental in the eventual passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, an act which banned several racially discriminatory voting practices.

Silencing and Erasure

7 Despite their important leadership, Black women's contributions to the Civil Rights Movement often went unrecognized. This is in part due to the multiple forms of oppression that they face. Black women experience both racism and sexism, and these forms of oppression combine in distinct ways that are different from the challenges that white women or Black men face. Sexism—in addition to the racism they already faced—impacted the way that Black women worked within the Civil Rights Movement.

8 For example, Black male leaders often excluded women from more public leadership positions. At the 1963 March on Washington, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, not a single woman was included as a main speaker. Several women challenged this decision, but the male organizers didn't listen to them.

9 Sexism, and the way that it interacts with racism, additionally impacted the ways in which Black women were included in mainstream historical accounts—and which of their stories were told to begin with. For instance, Rosa Parks is often remembered only as a tired seamstress who spontaneously refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus, when in actuality she was a lifelong activist. Similarly, a teenager named Claudette Colvin was arrested after refusing to give up her seat nine months before Rosa Parks. Colvin's story, however, is vastly overlooked—in part due to her age, social status, and other aspects of her identity and personal life.

Lasting Inspiration

10 In recent years, museum exhibits have highlighted the contributions of Black women in the Civil Rights Movement. In 2023, the National Women's History Museum opened an exhibition titled "We Who Believe in Freedom: Black Feminist DC," which focused on Black feminist organizers in Washington, D.C., from the late 19th century to today. Exhibits like these have brought the work of Black women's activism into the spotlight and traced their influence on future generations. Many of today's leaders and activists have followed in the footsteps of Baker, Nash, and Hamer. Brittany Packnett Cunningham, cofounder of a national campaign to end police violence, is a grassroots organizer like Baker. Melanie L. Campbell, president and CEO of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, fights to increase Black voter participation, just as Hamer did.

11 Historians and artists also work to honor these women's legacies. Books like Dr. Barbara Ransby's 2003 *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement* have brought attention to her life's work. Documentaries like *Fannie Lou Hamer's America* (2022) have also helped bring her story to the forefront. Monica Land, Hamer's great-niece, explained her reason for producing the film: "Knowing the contribution that she made to society, I just wanted her to be recognized and remembered."