Women in the Civil Rights Movement

TRAILBLAZERS AND TORCHBEARERS, 1941-1965

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Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta

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Prior to the summer of 1964, the civil rights movement had achieved few victories, especially in the rural South. The federal government, its rhetoric notwithstanding, was vacillating in its support for civil rights workers; the repressive powers of white supremacists were extensive; most blacks in the Mississippi Delta were afraid of any form of political involvement. The decision to join the movement in that early period, then, was very different from the decision to join later. It was a chancier, much more dangerous proposition, dangerous enough that the overwhelming response of local blacks in the Delta when organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or other groups first entered a town was to keep them at arms' length. The men and women who signed on in the early years were very much in the minority in their communities. Nevertheless, vigorous and sustained movements were created across the Delta. I am in the process of studying the movement in and around Greenwood, Mississippi.

One of the important questions emerging from any study of the civil rights movement is the question of the overparticipation of women. My respondents, male and female, unanimously agree with Lawrence Guyot, a member of SNCC: "It's no secret that young people and women led organizationally." Women took civil rights workers into their homes, of
course, giving them a place to eat and sleep, but women also canvassed more than men, showed up more often at mass meetings and demonstrations, and more frequently attempted to register to vote.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to suggest explanations for the greater willingness of women to join the movement in the early 1960s, a pattern all the more interesting because the pattern of the 1950s is quite different. In that more dangerous decade, black political activism in rural Mississippi was dominated by men, most of them associated with the NAACP, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, or both—Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry, Medgar Evers, Clyde Kennard, E. W. Steptoe, C. J. Stringer, Vernon Dahmier, T. R. W. Howard, and others. It is true that, historically, black women have always fulfilled social roles not commonly played by women in white society, but that has not always led to the kind of dominance of political activity that existed in rural Mississippi in the 1960s. This higher degree of participation by women is interesting too because the standard position among political scientists has been that, "Women all over the world are less active in politics than men."²

The pattern of participation seems to be age-specific. That is, among older people, there is no clear sexual imbalance. In fact, in the earliest days of the movement in Greenwood, a number of older men, men in their fifties and sixties, played important roles in getting the movement off the ground.³ Similarly, there is no appreciable difference between teenage boys and teenage girls. The gender difference is strongest in the years inbetween, roughly thirty to fifty. In that age range, some of my respondents estimated that women were three or four times more likely than men to participate.

Although the people to whom I spoke generally agreed about the nature of the pattern, there was no consensus on the reasons. They offered a variety of conflicting, sometimes contradictory explanations, and many had no way to account for the difference. Even those who did offer explanations were not confident about them or anxious to defend them. It was also my impression that these gender differences were not something my respondents had given a lot of thought to, even though they were aware of them. Given that in 1963 gender was not as politicized a social category as it is now, this is not surprising.

One factor that should be considered is SNCC's operating style. SNCC was the most active organization in the Delta and it was relatively open to women. If anyone can be called the founder of SNCC, it is Ella Baker, and in SNCC's early years, women were always involved in the development of policy and the execution of the group's program. The group was antihierarchical and antihierarchical, willing to work with anyone who was willing to have them, traditional considerations of status notwithstanding. They worked with sharecroppers as well as doctors, with the pool room crowd as well as the church crowd. SNCC organizers emphasized finding and developing nontraditional sources of leadership. Women obviously represented an enormous pool of untapped leadership potential. Much of SNCC's organizing activity in the Delta involved door-to-door canvassing, which meant that women were as likely as men to encounter organizers. SNCC, despite the traditional definitions of sex roles held by many of its members, was structurally open to female participation in a way that many older organizations were not. Had SNCC employed a more traditional style of organizing—working primarily through previously established leadership—it might not have achieved the degree of female participation it did. Still, saying that SNCC was open to the participation of women does not explain why women were responsive.

One explanation that initially seems plausible—demographics—can be rejected. The argument here goes that the massive migrations out of the South in the 1940s and 1950s drew away more men in the twenty-to-forty age range than it did women. Thus there were simply more women around in the 1960s when the movement began. It is true that the migrations, especially in the early stages, took a large number of men out of the Delta, but at least for Greenwood, even when one looks at families where both husband and wife are present, the wives were far more likely to participate.

Some of the other suggested explanations are not so easily disposed of. One idea, mentioned by several respondents, is that women were less exposed to reprisals than men. The argument goes that Southern whites were less afraid of black women and thus less likely to initiate either physical violence or economic reprisals against them. Even when economic reprisals were used, the wife's salary was likely to be less important to the family than the husband's. If anyone was going to be fired, better the woman. In short, it was safer and more cost-effective for women to participate.

I do not find the differential reprisal position plausible. If, under normal circumstances, whites were more indulgent of transgressions of racial norms when they came from black women, it does not follow that the same indulgence would extend to the highly charged, abnormal situation of 1962 and 1963. By that time, whites in the Delta clearly felt threatened, and it
seems likely that they would have struck back at whomever they associated with the threat, old indulgences notwithstanding.

Moreover, even if a pattern of indulgence, in fact, existed, it may not have been apparent to women who were thinking about joining the movement. Reprisals against women in the rural South were constant and highly visible. Examination of SNCC's newsletters in 1962 and 1963 suggests that some of the most violent incidents of reprisals took place against women. Women who were even rumored to be part of the movement lost their jobs. Every adult woman I interviewed got fired, except for those who quit because they expected to get fired. Women were regularly clubbed at demonstrations or beaten in jail. The homes of women activists were regularly shot into. Any woman in the Delta who contemplated joining the early movement had to be aware of all this. In such a situation, even if there were some gender-related differences in the likelihood of reprisal, the women involved may not have noticed it.

Moreover, it is misleading to think of reprisals as being directed against merely the individual who was involved. Anyone who joined the movement placed his or her whole family at risk. When one person got evicted, the entire family was evicted. True, the man pressured by his boss to get his wife out of the movement could say, "Gee, boss, I can't do anything with her, you know how women are," and hope for a sympathetic response. It was only a hope, though. The Citizen's Council in particular made it a point to put pressure on the entire family. If anyone in a family was known to be a part of the movement, every adult in that family was likely to have trouble finding work or getting credit. Similarly, the most popular forms of violence in that period—arson, drive-by shootings into homes, and bombings—were reprisals against family units, not individuals.

As the severity of reprisals eventually lessened, there was not necessarily a corresponding increase in male participation. Lawrence Guyot, drawing on his experience organizing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, noted that in the mid-1960s, when repression had slackened off some, there was no sudden rush of men into political activism. Indeed, Guyot recalls telling a group of women that included Victoria Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Annie Devine that the time had come for them to step back and let the men come forth (a mistake he says he would not make today).

Finally, the differential reprisal interpretation strikes me as unconvincing because no woman to whom I spoke ever suggested, even indirectly, that her own involvement could be explained in such terms. Nor did anyone ever identify any specific woman whose participation was affected by the reprisal issue.

When explaining their own decisions to join the movement, my respondents constructed answers primarily in terms of either religious belief or preexisting social networks of kinship and friendship. For many women, both factors seem operative. Thus, Lou Emma Allen was drawn into the movement by her son, a junior college student. Though she was often afraid, she was sure the Lord would see her through. She frequently led the singing at mass meetings in Greenwood. Appropriately, the first song she ever sang was "Take Your Burdens to the Lord and Leave Them There." Belle Johnson got involved after June, her fourteen-year-old daughter, was arrested along with Fannie Lou Hamer and Annelle Ponder and beaten brutally. Laura McGhee explained that she was initially interested in the movement because of her brother, a courageous NAACP officer who had been shot a few years earlier. Susie Morgan was drawn in partly by the activity of her daughters. She prayed and prayed over the decision to join and finally she saw that it was what the Lord wanted her to do. Ethel Gray was drawn into the movement by an old friend. After she joined, people drove by and threw rattlesnakes on her porch but, "We stood up. Me and God stood up." The pattern in their histories is one of joining initially because of relatives or friends and then feeling a source of support from the Lord. (There was also a third theme, which I am not going to discuss here—the growing admiration some of them felt for the young SNCC organizers.)

The religious issue raises a series of important questions. One line of explanation for the overparticipation of women might go as follows: The movement grew out of the church. Women participate in the church more than men do. (One estimate is that across all varieties of black religious activities, women represent seventy-five to ninety percent of the participants.) Therefore, women were naturally more drawn to the movement.

This argument confuses the church in the urban South with that in the rural South. In urban areas, the churches certainly were an early focal point of organizing activity. It is not surprising that there was a high level of participation by women in the activities of the SCLC because many of that organization's affiliates were large urban churches populated largely by women. Their rural counterparts, however, were far less supportive of the movement. In Greenwood, as in much of the Delta, the movement grew in spite of the church. In the first six months after SNCC workers came to
Greenwood, only two churches were open to them and one of them was only halfheartedly supportive. One of the common themes in speeches at meetings of that period was the hypocrisy and cowardice of ministers. Nine months after the first organizers came, Greenwood was fairly well mobilized—hundreds of people were trying to register and there were marches and mass meetings on a daily basis. Only after the general population was aroused did thirty-one black ministers sign a statement of support for the movement. How sincere they were is open to question. Sometime after they signed the statement of support, SNCC's Bob Moses wrote a memo saying that the lack of real cooperation from ministers was still the biggest single problem facing the local movement. (Ironically, sanctified churches, which historically have allowed women wider scope than other denominations, were probably the slowest to join the movement; Methodist churches were probably the fastest to do so.)

Those in the Delta who joined the movement in the early days, then, ordinarily did so in defiance of their church leadership. Nonetheless, if the church as an organization did not lead people into the movement, the religiosity of the population may have been more important. I noted that it is important to make a distinction between the pre- and post-1964 periods. The victories that affected the daily life of the average person began in the summer of 1964 with the Public Accommodations Bill. After that we got the Voting Rights Act, bringing federal registrars to the South. The same period saw a decline in the frequency of both economic and physical reprisals and increasingly vigorous federal prosecution of those who persisted in violence.

Those who joined the movement in its early days could not have known that things would work out as they did. What they did know for certain was that those who joined were going to suffer for it. From the viewpoint of most rural black Southerners in 1962 or 1963, the overwhelming preponderance of evidence must have suggested that the movement was going to fail. Joining a movement under such circumstances may literally require an act of faith. Durkheim noted the empowering function of religion: "The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force either to endure the trials of existence or to conquer them." Durkheim may have gotten the gender wrong, but the analysis is right. Faith in the Lord made it easier to have faith in the possibility of social change. As the slaves of a century ago, according to Du Bois, saw the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in the coming of the Civil War, residents of the Delta may have seen the civil rights movement as a sign that God was stirring. The civil rights workers, most of them Southerners and native Mississippians in this early period, were careful to respect the religious beliefs of local communities and often held the same kinds of beliefs themselves. A constant element in their rhetoric was that God was with the movement. Such an argument would have the most impact with the most religious—women rather than men, older men rather than younger ones.

It might be helpful to know more about why women, regardless of race, age, or education, are more religious than men in the first place. Despite considerable research, there is no clear answer. But the pattern seems to hold, by any measure of religiosity, for all major Western religions other than Judaism. The difference does not appear to be related to gender differences in labor force participation or to the greater role that women play in the socialization of children. Another popular notion, in the tradition of some Marxist thought, is that the church serves to compensate those most deprived of "real" rewards—women, the poor, the elderly. Attempts to support that interpretation have generally failed. In fact, in many populations, the most economically privileged appear more religious than the least privileged, although among blacks there seems to be no relationship between religiosity and social status.

If previous research does not provide any explanation of the generally greater religiosity of women, the literature has ordinarily been interpreted to mean that strong religious feelings ought to militate against participation in a change-oriented movement. One review of the literature concludes that the values reinforced by traditional churches:

... include a world view focused on the private sector of life and with such immediate social orientations as the family, ethnic group or local community. They are associated with conformity and conservatism in all attitude realms and with personal and privatistic commitments not oriented to social change. They value conformity and tradition more than individual freedom and tolerance of diversity, social conservatism more than social change, and definite moral codes more than individualized moral orientations.

This interpretation, consistent with the idea of religion as opiate, obviously does not cover the situation of Southern blacks. If the pre-1950s history of the rural black church conforms to this model, the history since then suggests that there is nothing inherently conservative about the church, that
its message can as easily be packaged in order-threatening as in order-serving ways. Similarly, it is ironic that investment in "personal and privatistic commitments" should be thought to be conservatizing. Among the women I have studied, it is just such commitments that played a large role in drawing them into the movement. A more flexible model might hold that involvement in such commitments ordinarily militates against involvement in social movements, but once any one person in the network becomes politically involved, the strength of the social ties within the network is likely to draw other members in. In the Delta, there were two populations predisposed to the message that SNCC conveyed. One consisted of mostly older men associated with the NAACP who had been active around issues of voter registration since the 1950s. Thus, when Sam Block, SNCC's first organizer in Greenwood, arrived, an older man named Cleve Jordan, a man with a local reputation as a hellraiser on the registration issue, introduced him to people around town who would be responsive. The other group that responded quickly were young people. Better educated than their parents, more knowledgeable about the broader society, many of them were easily attracted to the movement, frequently against their parents' wishes. Thus the situation that SNCC usually encountered in the Delta was that while most people were initially afraid, some were interested right away and given the tightly knit social bonds of rural communities, they were able to pull others in. Since women tend to be more deeply invested than men in networks of kin and community, it is not surprising that more women tended to be drawn in during the early stages. When teenage children were drawn in, for example, that seems to have a greater affect on their mothers and aunts than on their male relatives.

The greater investment of women in kin and communal networks should also affect the nature of their work inside the movement, an idea suggested by Karen Sacks's contemporary analysis of a union-organizing drive among black women in a Southern hospital. Sacks was particularly concerned with the differing styles of leadership exhibited by men and women. As one of the women participants put it, "Women are organizers, men are leaders." That is, "women created the organization, made people feel a part of it, as well as doing the everyday work upon which most things depended, while men made public announcements, confronted and negotiated with management." Certain women operated as network centers, mobilizing existing social networks around the organizing goals, mediating conflicts, conveying information, coordinating activity, in short, "creating and sustaining good relations and solidarity among co-workers." Many of these skills seemed to be rooted in the way these women operated in their families. I suspect Sacks's description of the leadership style of the women she studied would also fit very well the role played by rural women in the civil rights movement, which raises another question. All apart from the issue of why more women were drawn to the movement, there is the issue of how such high levels of female participation changed the overall tone of the movement. Drake and Cayton claimed in their study of Chicago that black women community leaders were more trusted than men, at least in part because of the perception that women could not as easily capitalize off of their activities. Similarly, the preponderance of women in the movement may have helped to create an atmosphere in which it was relatively easy to establish and maintain trust. At a guess, one would think that the participation of so many women meant that relationships inside the movement would have been less competitive and more nurturing than would have been the case otherwise. These women very clearly came to see SNCC organizers and some of the other out-of-town volunteers as their children. A movement with these familial overtones, reinforced in early SNCC by its ideal of the Beloved Community, must have been a supportive and empowering political environment. At a point in the movement's history when the prospects for success seemed poor, when the stresses and tensions involved in organizing were great, such a climate may have done much to sustain the activists.

While religiosity is among the issues stressed by the people I spoke to, it may be an error to take it too literally. Alberta Barnett, a Greenwood resident who joined the movement while still in high school, said: "Round here women just go out for meetings and things more than men. Men just don't do it. They don't participate in a lot of things. The most they participate in is a trade." She suggests that much of the organizational life of black Greenwood, not just the church and the movement, was dependent on women. Ella Baker, who had decades of experience as an organizer in the South, felt much the same way and as early as the late 1950s had tried to talk SCLC into developing programs that put more emphasis on women. Gilkes found that in the contemporary urban North, black women community workers are more common than men, which is consistent with my own experience with community organizations. Similar patterns may sometimes exist in white communities. McCourt's study of community organizations in a working-class white ethnic Chicago community found them dominated by women.
Thus, the pattern of relatively high levels of female participation among either black or working-class women seems to exist in several types of nontraditional political activities in widely differing circumstances. Even without a more precise description, it seems unlikely that religion would have the centrality in all of these circumstances that it had in the Delta.

The important element, then, may not be so much religion itself as the sense of efficacy it can engender. One way to get at this is to look at situations in which men did participate in large numbers. In the Delta, one such place was Holmes County, just south of Greenwood. According to my interviews, Holmes County was one place where the movement was dominated by men from the very beginning. Indeed, the men of Holmes County did not wait for organizers to get around to them; they went to Greenwood and invited organizers to Holmes. Holmes has a distinctive history. It has traditionally been a black-majority county, which is not unusual for the Delta, but since before World War II it has also been a county in which most of the land has been owned by blacks. It is almost certain landownership gave them a greater degree of freedom from economic reprisals, but one student of the county's history feels that the tradition of landownership and cooperative work contributed to a distinctive worldview among the men. Salamon found that compared to local sharecroppers, the landowners were more optimistic about the future, had a higher sense of personal efficacy, and were more likely to feel that they had been of help to others. By every measure, landowners were far more likely to participate in the early civil rights movement. Thus it may be that landowning for men, perhaps especially when blacks own whole communities, has some of the same psychological effects as religion for women, particularly with respect to an enhanced sense of personal efficacy.

NOTES


10. Ibid.
12. Hoge and Roozen, Understanding Church Growth.