Womanpower in the Civil Rights Movement

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WOMANPOWER IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A Thesis

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The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Yvette Hutchinson

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Approved, August 1990

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the significance of black women's activism in the Civil Rights Movement. In the traditions of black women's activist heritage black women, through "womanpower," formed female networks to work on behalf of the black community.

During the Civil Rights Movement two women's groups, The Women's Political Council in Montgomery, Alabama, and Womanpower Unlimited in Jackson Mississippi, organized their local communities to challenge the Jim Crow transportation system and make domestic provisions for student volunteers. A strong sense of community inspired black women's activism and provided a model of political challenge for student volunteers.

During the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964 some of the white women in challenging racist oppression began to challenge another form of oppression: the sexism that they experienced within the Movement. Using two documents, one written by white volunteers and another by a black Project Director, this study examines the polarization of race and gender and its effects on black womanpower.
WOMANPOWER IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
INTRODUCTION

The Civil Rights Movement was a nucleus of political energy created by and available to men and women who fought for social change. It was not just a monolith of traditional protest action led by a few male leaders; the role of women was in no way secondary to that of the high profile black men. The Civil Rights Movement was one phase in the long tradition of black women's activism that stretched right back to the endeavors of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth.

Historically for black women, issues of race and gender have always been closely linked. Thus, their particular brand of political challenge has always been geared towards empowering the black community's men and women. Creating their own models and prototypes, black women have developed a "mode d'emploi" which has seized upon networks of female bonding and gender consciousness, as well as a tradition of communal thinking for the elevation of the race.

In an article entitled "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," Temma Kaplan argues that in considering "feminist" political action recognition should be given to collective/community
consciousness and female consciousness as aspects of women's political agenda. This quite specific definition of women's political perspectives is a useful framework for an analysis of the activism of black women.

That which inspired black women was a dual mission of female activism for community advancement. Black women, unlike whites, were not fighting for the right to become autonomous political beings; the fact of their gender and race in a racist patriarchy had already necessitated a degree of activism. Black women were working for community autonomy, not just for themselves as a gender group. Thus, being primarily concerned with black community interests, black women used female networks as a focal point for organizing women to work on behalf of the black community. Black women were not in any way supportive of a male political hegemony but were displaying a careful consideration of black issues that demanded community-centered and woman-centered political interplay.

Ostensibly the history of women's activism in America is one of sisterhood that aimed to unite all women and to transcend the racial barrier. However, very rarely did this black/white sisterhood occur, and even then it was mainly at times of expediency for white women. In the nineteenth century the issue of woman's suffrage was one that white women shared

with blacks; however, for black women, disenfranchisement was one grievance on a long continuum of injustices they faced as black individuals. Being of the minority race and the subordinated gender group, and having a recent history of chattel slavery and sexual abuse, the black woman's political outlook challenged racism, sexism, and the subsequent institutionalized social and cultural repercussions of these forms of discrimination. By the mid-nineteenth century white women were becoming stronger in their political offensives and saw gender as the major political issue. In contrast, the historian Paula Giddings argues, "When it came to a question of priorities, race, for most {black women} came first, . . . It was the issue of race that sparked their feminism."  

The American Equal Rights Association (AERA), founded by Lucy Stone and Susan B. Anthony in May 1866, aimed to create an organization for human rights. The AERA was an amalgamation of the abolitionist and women's suffrage organizations. At the time of the founding, there was hope that they could fight for human rights, but conflicting priorities made this an impossible ideal. Women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were feminists and abolitionists, and they attempted to effect change by confronting America with its own miscarriages of social justice. The idealistic aims for egalitarian change through the medium of an organization

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representing both racial and gender groups would later be mirrored by the aims of blacks and whites in student political organizations during the Civil Rights era. The hopes of widening the scope of a political agenda to include an awareness of the oppression of different groups encouraged cooperation between abolitionists and suffragists.

The lobbying of 1866 and 1867 against racial and sexual restrictions had a positive impact on a few state constitutions. But the immediate results were more gratifying for black men than they were for white women; it was black men who were receiving the benefits and being granted a greater voice in the political arena. This development caused a growing tension among members of the AERA. An example of the expediency of white women's championing of the black woman's cause was revealed in the white women's response to the black man's political successes. White women began to argue on behalf of black women saying that the enfranchised black man would add to the double tyranny that black women already faced. Their arguments reveal that white women were aware of the double jeopardy of being black and female, but it also implies that they only showed an awareness of the issue of black women's double jeopardy when their aims, as white suffragists, were not being realized. In terms of the AERA, the response of the white women suggests a kind of hypocrisy in their alliance with the abolitionists and their support for black rights. As the historian Ellen Carol DuBois argues, "The
attention paid to black women was more rhetorical than real."³

In 1867 the Kansas legislature began to consider a woman suffrage referendum. Many women's rights activists worked hard to canvass the politicians. To Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton it appeared that black men were the only ones who were benefitting from the AERA alliances. The Republican party had traditionally been the abolitionist party and had regarded the question of women's suffrage as a secondary, possibly divisive, issue. Frustrated with the party's apathy concerning women's suffrage, Anthony and Stanton joined forces with George Francis Train, an eccentric financier and racist white supremacist, who supported woman suffrage as part of his own presidential campaign. The alliance of these feminist leaders with George Train had a major effect on the whole tenor of women's activism and raised doubts about their honesty in seeking alliances with black suffragists. Ellen Carol DuBois notes the lasting effects of this opportunism:

The swiftness and energy with which Stanton and Anthony turned from their own abolitionist traditions to Train's racism remains remarkable. At this point, their racism was opportunist and superficial, an artifact of their anti-Republicanism and their alienation from abolitionists. However, it drew and strengthened a much deeper strain within their feminism, a tendency to envision women's emancipation in exclusively white terms. They learned how to transform white women's racism into a kind of sex

pride, a technique to which they were later to turn in building the women's suffrage movement.4

The alliance with Train was a blatant example of the insidious racism and exclusivity of white women's political activism.

Black women, many of whom had little confidence in the possibility of working equally with white women to achieve their aims, were forced by historical precedence and current circumstances to unite in order to speak for themselves. They saw that they could not depend on alliances, which were proving unreliable, with white women. The black abolitionist, suffragist, writer, and public speaker, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper saw that "the white women all go for sex, letting race occupy a minor position, . . ." Harper realized that "being black means that every white, including every white working class woman, can discriminate against you."5 When the Fifteenth Amendment (which would permit suffrage to black males but not to women of any race) was proposed in 1867, black and white women were confronted with the dichotomy of their political aims. Black women were concerned with what would help the race in general; therefore for most black women support of the Fifteenth Amendment was considered an important step forward. The educator and suffragist Anna J. Cooper

4 Ibid., 96.

succinctly described how the majority of black women felt concerning their political agenda as anti-racist suffragists: "For woman's cause is man's, they rise or sink together, dwarfed or god-like, bond or free." Black women were fighting for their communities as well as for themselves, so even when they joined together as women their cause was not to be divided along gender lines.

At the end of Reconstruction black women enjoyed an unprecedented presence in professions and educational institutions. Black women's organizations were not just professional, neither were they just female, but they were geared towards women's progress. More and more black women were organizing to achieve their own well-defined aims. The Black Women's Club movement was a nationwide phenomenon which was a catalytic agent in bringing together many strands of black women's activism towards a development of one organization dedicated to gender and race advancement. Cynthia Neverdon-Morton notes that "educated black women worked to improve the condition of the race."

The National Association of Colored Women (NACW), established in 1896, was an amalgamation of the National

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League of Colored Women in Washington, D.C., led by Mary Church Terrell, and the National Federation of Afro-American Women headed by Margaret Murray Washington. The credo of the NACW was "Lifting As We Climb." The Club movement was dedicated to the cause of encouraging black women to reach their full potential in their professional and personal endeavors. At the same time, as the credo suggested, in reaching greater heights black women should be working towards the elevation of the race. Their activity was two-fold: the self-actualization of the black woman, in concert with the improvement of the race, and these were not dissimilar to the goals of white feminist activists. Both black and white women, in encouraging gender progress, were concerned with directing their activities to the poorer disadvantaged classes. Women worked in mainly religious and charity organizations to teach educational and domestic skills to poor women. In the preservation and upbuilding of both races women displayed a political analysis that reflected contemporary cultural trends and ideas concerning women's roles and the arena in which their activism could be played out. Care of the domestic sphere and the primary socialization of the children were the tasks to which women were considered to be specifically suited.

However, this said, there were differences in the historical events behind the aims of black and white women which proved to be vital factors in their activism. Concerning
political equality, black women were not merely benevolent in their reform work within the black community; they shared a common experience of race which bound them inextricably with all blacks, male and female, rich and poor, in a way that white women could not understand. Black women did not receive the respect that the dominant culture had ascribed to womanhood. Educated black women shared a common reality with their poor black sisters in that they were treated with disdain and prejudice, regardless of their economic, social or intellectual status. The Black Women's Club movement was a recognition of the central fact that all women of color could face racist oppression. Thus the black woman's activism had to transcend class and gender barriers in that she was fighting against an oppression that was based, as she experienced it, on the color of her skin. Also, in the whole issue of the preservation of the family in the community, black women, in contrast with their white counterparts, had a recent history of having to fight to keep their families together. One of the consequences of slavery was that the slaves lived with the knowledge of their own powerlessness in the face of the slave-master and their subsequent inability to chart the future of their offspring. Slavery had frequently attempted to break up the family as one of the main components of the black community's social structure. The survival of this attack strengthened a belief in black women's unique ability to serve their families and look after community interests.
The black woman used gender-specific organization and even an acceptance of ascribed gender roles to work to maintain her challenge to the external forces that sought to harm her community. This strategy meant that unlike the white women's clubs which were almost exclusively concerned with gender improvement and discouraged input from men or male-led organizations, black women's groups had to work alongside men and support their agendas. For black women the political climate demanded anti-racist action, and this could only be achieved by a united black community. Thus, as Giddings suggests, "Clubwomen . . . saw the status of their men as part and parcel of many of the goals they were trying to achieve." The concept of "womanpower" was one which they boldly claimed and used as a rationale for the activities that they pursued.

Thus, despite the similarity of their aims, the activism of black and white women differed significantly in the promotion of social change. White women were working under one political offensive to gain suffrage rights for women. The suffragists believed that through their influence on the political scene many of society's ills would be eradicated. Black women, on the other hand, were working from a dual perspective. They were activists whose challenges came from their double experiences of racism and sexism. The racism that they faced from white men and women meant that the offensive that they waged could not be based on gender alone, as this

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8 Giddings, 112.
would exclude black men who suffered alongside the black woman. Their activism had to be based on race since they had no historical precedence or even current circumstantial evidence to encourage an alliance with white men or women. For black women, "womanpower" was not just a politicisation of "gender," it was the focus of a gender group on a specific system of racism that attacked the black community as a whole.
CHAPTER I

Prototypes in Montgomery and Jackson

Decades after the establishment of the National Council of Colored Women, and almost one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, that specific system of racial discrimination continued to stultify the development of Black men and women in America. Black people still had to struggle to ensure that the basic educational, social, and economic needs of their community were being met. The structures of racial segregation still remained in the South and so, consequently, did the black organizations. Through the pooling of material, vocational, and educational resources, men and women worked in concert, for community advancement.

The activities of black women was one aspect of this concerted political drive. Using "womanpower," black women encouraged community support for local political initiatives. This womanpower was not encoded in a specific theory of activism but was accepted as an integral part of the black women's role in her community.
There were two outstanding women's organizations whose efforts helped to chart the course of the Movement in the 1950s and '60s. The Women's Political Council (WPC) and Womanpower Unlimited united black women from different educational and financial strata to challenge racial discrimination. Both groups had a fundamental principle of dedicating their initiatives to all members of the black community. They encouraged women to work and participate in all aspects of the struggle ranging from domestic support to political leadership. As women's groups working for the progress of black men and women, these two groups helped to build a foundation for the focus and objectives of black women's activism during the Civil Rights Movement.

In December 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a segregated bus, and her subsequent arrest, sparked a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, that attracted national attention and was a precipitous factor in the burgeoning activism that became the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Parks's adamant refusal to be humiliated by the Jim Crow public transportation system was one of many such occurrences in Montgomery. Her rebellion was not an isolated incident, and the Women's Political Council had long since established the infrastructure for the politicisation of one such independent event as a stepping stone for community challenge to segregated public transportation in Montgomery.
The Women's Political Council had been founded in 1946 by Dr. Mary Fair Burks, the Chairman of the Department of English at Alabama State College. The W.P.C. was a group of black professional women whose publicly unspoken aim was to work towards racial integration in Montgomery. By the time of the boycott in 1955 the W.P.C. President was Mrs. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, a teacher at the local college. She described the W.P.C. as "womanpower, organized to cope with any injustice no matter what, against the darker sect."¹ The W.P.C. worked in local voter education projects and also sponsored youth training programs on understanding civic and local government administration. The W.P.C. was very much a community organization and was regarded as such by the many men and women who had reason to call on it for support and advice. Their role as a community advice bureau became more important as local complaints, especially against the segregated transportation system, increased. There were other black political organizations in Montgomery, and the W.P.C. worked alongside these groups. The Progressive Democratic Association, Montgomery's main black political group, was led by E. D. Nixon, an NAACP member and political associate of the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph. Nixon, Robinson, and Rufus Lewis, the head of the voter registration organization, The Citizens' Steering

Committee, were all part of a growing network of southern activists whose major concern was black community development. Working alongside these civil rights groups was the W.P.C., and the members used the ideology of "womanpower" to create an administrative structure that would mobilize the community when circumstances demanded.

In her memoirs Mrs. Robinson discusses how the W.P.C. had prepared itself for a boycott of the buses. A formidable organization of networks for pamphlet distribution and community mobilization was in place. The W.P.C. members knew that they could depend on the established community network to keep everyone informed about crucial events. Thus on December 1, 1955, when Mrs. Parks refused to give up her seat or alight the bus, her stand provided the specific incident around which an already organized offensive could take place. Indeed as the notice prepared by Mrs. Robinson shows, the boycott was not dependent on Mrs. Parks's approval; the W.P.C. decided that her arrest would be the catalyst for a challenge to the Bus Company of Montgomery, Alabama.

The Women's Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks's consent to call for a boycott of city buses. On Friday December 2, 1955, the women of Montgomery will call for a boycott to take place on Monday, December 5.²

In the foreword to Mrs. Robinson's memoirs, historian David Garrow describes the author as the "instigator of the movement

² Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, a memo to the community on the Women's Political Council's decision to organize a bus boycott around the issue of Mrs. Parks's arrest. Ibid., 45.
to start the boycott." However, Mrs. Robinson was adamant in pointing out that "the black women did it."³ It was the organization of women who worked behind the scenes to mobilize the community to whom Mrs. Robinson paid tribute. An important factor was the way in which the W.P.C. did not attempt to control the movement once it had started but let the community choose its leaders, decide the duration of the boycott, and enumerate the grievances for which they demanded redress. The people of Montgomery chose the tried, tested, and traditional organ of the church to speak on their behalf. The church was the center of the black community, and people looked to the ministers for political as well as spiritual guidance. Peaceful and dignified, civil disobedience was an acceptable form of protest that received full support from the church, the most influential organization within the black community. Interestingly enough, it was not until the boycott had been organized that the ministers actually heard about what was happening in Montgomery. As Robinson notes, the "leaders had to catch up with the masses."⁴

Out of the boycott came the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), and from its inception, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson and the veteran Montgomery activist Irene West were selected to represent it in the black delegation that would negotiate with the bus company and local officials. The M.I.A.

³ Ibid., xv.
⁴ Ibid., 53.
employed the services of four full-time workers, and they were all women who were in some way affiliated with the W.P.C. These and other W.P.C. members continued working independently as well as together with the M.I.A. Officials of the W.P.C. investigated charges of threatening behavior from the black and the white communities and insisted on police protection for prominent members of both organizations. The boycott encouraged the establishment of car pools, local taxi services, child-minding co-operatives, and other auxiliary functions that the black people of Montgomery began to use as the boycott widened their political perspective and community aspirations. This local autonomy had been one of the central aims of the W.P.C., and even after the boycott, the organization continued to dedicate itself to community service with an emphasis on the education of Montgomery's black youth.

The work of the Women's Political Council with Jo Ann Gibson Robinson at its head shows the way women were able to organize not just themselves but a whole community to political challenge and local autonomy. In the light of this success we see that black women were capable of creating a workable administrative structure that could support a city-wide act of political rebellion. One can conclude that the Black Women's Club movement had in fact provided the beginnings of a prototype for political behavior and community activism upon which the Civil Rights activists were to build.
The black community accepted the black woman's activism as part of her female role. However, there was an assumption about the kind of activism in which women could involve themselves. Women's activities were regarded as being almost an extension of their domestic functions and were thus seen as a traditional part of black life. If black women accepted sex-defined roles, they stretched the possibilities of these roles, not to suit contemporary attitudes, but to transform the lives of black people. To expand on Kaplan's theory of female and community consciousness within the dialectics of feminist activism, it could be argued that the female consciousness of the black women's organizations during the period of the Civil Rights Movement was not just a consciousness of women as a class with shared experiences, but an adoption of certain aspects of the ideology of a specific sphere of women's behavior and activity. Within that sphere, as a group, women united to work for community development.

The work of Womanpower Unlimited, in Jackson, Mississippi, led by the businesswoman Mrs. Clarie Collins Harvey, shows how women worked within their expected domestic roles to facilitate political action that would be beneficial to all sectors of the community. As the title of the organization suggests, Womanpower Unlimited, like Robinson's W.P.C., depended on the concept of "womanpower":

Womanpower Unlimited, the significance of the name lies in the divine power of each woman, all woman
work together for peace among the people of a given community, nation and in the world.5

Harvey founded Womanpower Unlimited in 1961. She described it as "an underground network of 200-300 women who ministered to the Freedom Riders in jail, in prison and outside." 6

The Freedom Rides were organized by the Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE) in an attempt to desegregate all facilities in southern bus terminals. It was at the Jackson City Court hearing for the first arrested Freedom Riders that Mrs. Harvey became aware of the atrocities that were taking place and the awful hardships that these courageous students faced in their fight against segregation. Initially, Womanpower Unlimited offered food, clothing, and money to the Freedom Riders. However, their involvement did not stop there, Womanpower Unlimited was working toward "wholesome community life."7 The black church women of Jackson saw their work as service to the community, and not just residents of Jackson or Mississippi, but all people who were making physical and psychological sacrifices in challenging segregation in the southern states of America.


6 Clarie Collins Harvey, "Women As Social Activists In Church Based Movements." Paper presented to the "Women in the Civil Rights Movement, Trailblazers and Torchbearers" conference, The King Center-Atlanta, Georgia, October 12, 1988. Clarie Collins Harvey Collection, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

7 Harvey, "Womanpower and The Jackson Movement," 6
Whilst working with the Freedom Riders, Womanpower Unlimited worked to equip black people to participate in the freedoms that the judicial process and legislative machinery had secured for them. Womanpower Unlimited worked in voter registration drives and in organizing school attendance in newly desegregated schools. After the Freedom Rides the members of Womanpower Unlimited were anxious to continue and to broaden their activities; they got involved in anti-nuclear demonstrations, selective buying campaigns, and continued until 1978 working with local organizations and the United States Commission on Civil Rights for social justice and peace. The aim of the organization was to make a "significant contribution" to youth education, recreation, and job opportunities. In wanting to make significant contributions the women of Jackson, Mississippi, used the time and the community interest of men and women of all classes, in all professions, to support the students and to provide them with the kind of physical and psychological dignity that Jim Crow and their incarceration sought to eradicate. Womanpower Unlimited appealed to all sectors of the community to do what they could to help others. Like the women of Montgomery, Womanpower Unlimited encouraged a community autonomy and mobilization that was focused on the indigenous population by the particular activities of the female population.

8 Ibid., 19.
Both Clarie Collins Harvey and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson assumed administrative and political roles; they encouraged women to work in whatever way was available to them, to call on a black sisterhood to promote community improvement. Womanpower highlighted the importance of the church and the domestic arena as part of women's strengths. Thus, in improving the community neither organization saw fit to challenge these structures which were the pillars which upheld the activism of women and placed it into a framework that was easily acceptable to the black community. For these black women fighting for the survival of their communities, there was no great concern over the symbolism of their actions, neither did they debate the significance of their activism in relation to the patriarchy of white America. The black women of Montgomery, Alabama, and Jackson, Mississippi, wanted to see change in their immediate surroundings and in the opportunities for future black generations. Theirs was not only an ideological position, but a much needed response to the circumstances of their lives as blacks in a racist society.

Both Montgomery and Jackson were examples of community action against discrimination. Despite educational or material differences, black people were an homogeneous group in terms of the racial oppression they faced. This unified oppression demanded a unified activism for the realisation of genuine progress for black people in America. Therefore, even though
black women had their own gender groups, their focus had to be on black men and women. This dual perspective had not been forced upon black women by black men, but was a deliberate response that the women regarded as appropriate in the fight against racial discrimination and in the fight for black Civil Rights.
CHAPTER II

The Mississippi Summer Project

During the early 1960s at the height of the Movement, the activism of local black organizations was being augmented by sit-in's, meetings, marches, and boycotts that took place across America. The Movement was becoming a national phenomenon and began to attract a significant level of support and participation from young white people mainly from northern universities. The awful treatment of black people had not gone unnoticed, and many volunteers made commitments to work for equal rights for all people in America. These young volunteers, with their high ideals, hopes, and enthusiasm also wanted to apply the Movement's optimism for racial equality to other areas of American life. Many saw the Movement as a product of a political climate in America that challenged all injustices against black and white people. Perhaps the most significant example of this view is in the case of the white feminist movement which developed as a direct result of this political zeitgeist and as a product of the activism and strategies of the Civil Rights Movement. In
raising their own consciousness and fighting for female autonomy, those white women whose focus became gender politics knew that an integrated female autonomy would deliberately exclude black and white men. However, they were surprised and hurt to find that an exclusive gender focus, without a full understanding of the acute anxieties caused by racial and sexual oppression, would also exclude and alienate black women.

In 1964 the Mississippi Summer Project was launched. It was organized by the Council of Federated Organizations and led mainly by the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee.\(^1\) Northern teachers, professors, ministers, legal advisors, and students moved down to Mississippi to volunteer their services. The project focused on voter registration, Freedom Schools, Community Centers, local research and a project to work within white southern communities. Such a Summer Project was needed because of the intransigent opposition of the political powers in Mississippi to full black participation in the political system. As Bob Moses, the Project organizer, commented, it was "the realization that Mississippi couldn't be made to change from within" that made outside volunteers so important to the Summer Project.

\(^1\) The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), included the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as Mississippi community groups.
The Project was unique in that it was a concentrated time of inter-racial alliance in which mainly northern volunteers lived the realities of the social norms to which they wanted the South to subscribe. It was an important experiment in the Movement as "it was a decisive test of [SNCC's] integrationist orientation." As a result of this unique inter-racial living experience, the organizers hoped that many of the social taboos and cultural ignorance on the part of blacks and whites would be removed in an atmosphere of mutual respect and discovery. This shared exchange across racial and generational lines seemed to augur well for the future. Black men and women were fulfilling their obligations to their communities, and white volunteers were making their contributions to the fight against segregation.

COFO was very much dependent on the local contacts, networks, and internal political infrastructure that had been developed over time by local Mississippi activist groups. The energies of these political organizations were re-channelled towards the broad coalition of COFO and the Mississippi Summer Project. This federation of civil rights organizations did not conflict with any established groups, as the Womanpower Unlimited statement of purpose revealed:

Where there are no movements or organized efforts to bring about freedoms, we shall take initiative. Where efforts in these directions exist, we shall attempt to stimulate more creative and effective action and to cooperate in achieving abundant life for all of us by lending our womanpower.3

Through organized women's collectives and through personal contributions, black women across Mississippi hoped to direct their community activism and mobilize an indigenous unity against external forces of racial oppression. The Summer Project invited black women and men, within and outside of established organizations, to make a contribution to the freedom movement by participating in local activities.

The success of the Project was dependent on domestic and administrative efficiency. It is important to recognize that the domestic was, for many black women, the sphere in which they worked best. Also, it was easier to work around that area of the movement as cooking and comforting did not promote role conflict. For them, sexism was not the major issue; their primary concern was ridding the South of racial segregation so they were willing to do "domestic" work and what would later be considered as perpetuating stereotypes, in order to make a personal contribution to the Movement. Local black women were happy to offer accommodation and aid which the Summer Project organizers accepted on behalf of the volunteers. These volunteers lived in Mississippi, staying in

the homes of local residents and activists. Rather like the organization Womanpower Unlimited, black women all over Mississippi made domestic provisions for the Project volunteers. In her book *Freedom Summer*, white volunteer Sally Belfrage describes the family sharing, the learning, and the camaraderie that developed between the students and their Mississippi hostesses. 4 Their commitment to domestic provision notwithstanding, these host families did not limit themselves to the very dangerous task of housing white volunteers. They went further to help in voter registration drives; a few taught in Freedom Schools, and women attended church meetings and encouraged community support for local civil rights activities. As SCLC member Andrew Young recalled when he spoke at the funeral of the Mississippi activist Fannie Lou Hamer:

> It was women going door to door, speaking with their neighbors, meeting in voter-registration classes together, organizing through their churches, that gave the vital momentum and energy to the movement that made it a mass movement.5

Clayborne Carson argues that in the mobilization of black communities, the goal was not just federal action but a new political, social, and cultural agenda. This hope for great social change was not limited to black women; as he goes


on to say, all activists wanted "to create new social identities for all participants." This observation highlights a significant part of the Movement that the Summer Project clearly brought into focus. Along with external political developments, individuals began to see "civil rights" as a generic term under which many issues of liberation were entwined.

In voter registration schools and community centers, volunteers taught people the mechanics of voter registration. As they worked to "empower" local individuals to become active in the politics of their community, volunteers themselves were impressed with their own message of self-empowerment and political challenge. Men and women began to look to the social structure and the elements of their social environment which were a source of oppression if not to themselves then to others. It was this consideration of racism that encouraged the involvement of white northerners in the Project, and it would be the same kind of consideration that would cause white women to challenge sexism in what had the potential to be the most liberating experience of their lives.

Volunteers, especially the younger students, had invested their hopes and aspirations in the student branch of the Civil Rights Movement which they saw as a major vehicle for

realizing overall change in American society. Many of these volunteers were women who felt that the issue of sexual discrimination had to be dealt with inside and outside of Movement organizations. They saw the role of the Movement as that of challenging discrimination, and they wanted to encourage members to consider sexual discrimination as an essential part of the politics of liberation and personal freedom. The women did not expect to get the support of the male members of the Movement, but they were hopeful that the black women would join them in highlighting sexism as an evil within the ranks of the Movement and stressing its importance on the Civil Rights agenda.

The political agenda, however, was already set, and any other concern which arose out of the Project would be relegated to a secondary position. SNCC's principal role was to blend in with the needs and demands of local communities, and volunteers were sent to Mississippi to support the activism of its indigenous black population. Consequently, white women had to tread a fine line between doing the work for which they had volunteered and voicing their own political priorities. By the end of the summer white women saw (as New Left ideology would later propose) that as an oppressed group, they had to organize themselves first, rejecting the paternalistic aid of outsiders. The increasing political awareness in the peculiar environment of the Summer Project
was providing an arena for the political analysis which would later be espoused by Stokely Carmichael.

If political institutions do not meet the needs of the people, if the people finally believe that those institutions do not express their own values, then those institutions must be discarded. It is wasteful and inefficient not to mention unjust, to continue imposing old forms and ways of doing things on a people who no longer view those forms and ways as functional.\textsuperscript{7}

Recently, in a workshop on the Mississippi Freedom Summer, Joanne Grant, a former SNCC activist, stated that the Project was about "a new political agenda, a movement for social change, about coalitions."\textsuperscript{8} The Freedom Schools and voter registration drives both supported the political focus and promoted the cultural and social interaction that added a personal dimension to the organized political goal. However, among the coalitions that were enabling these successes to emerge, one important coalition was missing: that of black and white women as a group in itself and as a recognized and appreciated force within the Civil Rights Movement. There was an attempt on the part of blacks and whites to transcend all racial, cultural, and social barriers. However, in the case of women's activism there were no political, cultural, or


\textsuperscript{8} Joanne Grant, panelist at the "Freedom Summer" workshop at \textit{The Continuing American Dilemma}. A National Civil Rights Conference at the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans Louisiana. Friday November 10th - Monday November 13th,1989.
historical foundations to support this development. In a 1971 Black Scholar interview the then Black Panther activist Kathleen Cleaver argued,

The problems of black women and the problems of white women are so completely diverse they cannot possibly be solved in the same type of organization nor met by the same type of activity.9

Based on a shared history of racial discrimination, black men and women worked together in a black offensive against oppression. For black women, a separate women's political agenda had not been a part of their ambitions in the 1950s and 1960s. They felt that they could not afford to divide their struggle and weaken the chain of unity and commonality that they shared with black men. White women, who believed that they too had a shared history of discrimination with black women, wanted to unite with them against sex discrimination. Both the tactical and the ideological framework for feminist activism was based in part on the Civil Rights Movement, as historian Doug McAdam noted:

The basic elements of radical feminism--with its stress on self-determination, community, and empowering the powerless--were already encoded in the rhetoric and practices of SNCC to which the volunteers were exposed during the summer. 10


However, where the black women had joined together on behalf of the black community, the white feminists wanted to work only with women for the realisation of equality for the community of women. These women began to see themselves as a class of oppressed people and later formed a national network to challenge the forces of their oppression.

Charges of sexism within the Movement, especially by a few northern, middle-class whites, could be regarded as a threat to the leadership of the churches and the Christian teachings which inspired the ministers. They could cast serious aspersions on the acquiescence of the black woman, and most importantly those allegations could divide the black community at a time when it most needed strength and unity. White women saw the need to define their own oppression and to strengthen themselves as a group. They saw this as imperative to their own liberation and to their ability to make coalitions, believing that alliances could not be struck when one party was in a position of relative weakness. Black women, on the other hand, saw sexism as a peripheral issue to the all-pervasive evil of racial discrimination.

The raising of the question of sexism could challenge almost every aspect of the Movement, and, indeed, in looking at the organizational structure, it is easy to see how the pursuit of charges of sexual discrimination would rock the very foundations of the Movement hierarchy. The Christian church and the contemporary interpretations of the Bible
supported a strong male leadership. Traditionally the black Baptist minister demanded and received a respect for his position as a moral and political leader. Thus it would be incredibly difficult for any woman, regardless of her capabilities and organizational skills, to be elevated to a position of overall leadership. However, most black women, seeing male leadership as a strengthening factor in the structure of the black community, did not want to challenge this system of leadership.

The work of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson and Clarie Collins Harvey reveals that black women who wished to fight for political change were not going to wait for guidance from men; they would organize themselves around issues and pour themselves wholeheartedly into the tasks which they had chosen to confront. Despite this acceptance of womanpower in community activism, black women did not often gain leadership recognition and status in the black political hierarchy. The experiences of Ella Baker testifies to the black community's ambiguous endorsement of black women's political endeavors.

Baker, an established political activist, had been a well-respected worker in the NAACP and the organization In Friendship when Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levinson asked her to help them to set up an organization to sustain the fervor of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. With the amalgamation of

11 "In Friendship was an organization that offered economic support for blacks suffering reprisals for political activism in the South. This same group helped develop the idea
different religious activist groups, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was born. Later, in 1961 after the first sit-in, in Greensboro, North Carolina, Baker was one of the founding members of SNCC, the student group which worked to coordinate the sit-ins and direct action protests which were occurring across the South. Despite these significant contributions to the organizational structures of the Civil Rights Movement, Ella Baker had to restrict her expectations as regards leadership of large-scale, mixed gender political organizations. "As a woman, an older black woman, in a group of ministers who are accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for me to come into a leadership role," she recalled in 1970. 12

The decision-making process was dominated by men; indeed, as Dorothy Cotton recalls, the SCLC preachers "were the most chauvinistic of all."13 Yet, as Ella Baker pointed out, it was the women who in many cases were the organizers: "All of the churches depended, in terms of things taking


place, on women, not men."¹⁴ There was an assumption that the organizational hierarchy was the backbone of the Movement when in fact it was those whom they presumed to lead, the largely female congregation which attended services and meetings, who were the chief instruments of social change. This concentration on the role of the leader was important within the SCLC but should have run counter to the ideology of the student movement which professed itself as a movement to empower the people.

Within SNCC, some black women were Project Directors and Organizers, but the majority of Project Directors were men. One of the political ideologies upheld by SNCC was that of "empowerment of the people" or as Ella Baker said, "organizing people to be self-sufficient rather than to be dependent upon the charismatic leader."¹⁵ This opposition to a strong leadership structure meant that women would find it difficult to demand executive positions within an organization that was against such forms of hierarchy.

Anthropologist Diane Lewis observes that despite the fact that "women played a critical role in Civil Rights activities,


these movements significantly were seen as primarily male inspired and male led." Lewis also acknowledges the extent to which historians have tended to focus on the work of male "leaders" in the Movement and the result of this bias in perpetuating the myth of a wholly male-led movement. However, she suggests that "black women easily perceived their own interests expressed in these political and cultural ideologies."\textsuperscript{16} It is important to understand that while most black women did not necessarily see male leadership as a bad thing, neither did they see their own work as insignificant.

As the former SNCC Freedom Singer Bernice Johnson Reagon reflected, the role which Black women played in the Civil Rights Movement was a continuation of their contribution to the black historical process: a legacy of insurrection, rebellion, and confrontation.\textsuperscript{17}

A former CORE worker and COFO organizer, Mattie Dennis, suggested that a prevailing notion during the 1960s was that part of the Civil Rights Movement was to restore to men the black community leadership which slavery and racism had denied them.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{18} Mattie Dennis, CORE fieldworker. Interview by author,12,November 1989. Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.
There was a general consciousness among men and women that black men would hold the leadership positions in the movement. The reasoning behind the philosophy was that black women had held up their men for too long and it was time for the men to take charge.\(^\text{19}\)

Perhaps a parallel could be drawn between the black/white equality for which black people fought and the power imbalance of white gender relations. In working toward obtaining the same rights for blacks as their white counterparts already enjoyed, black men and women may ironically have been fighting for what amounted to the gender role separation and female subordination which existed in white American society in the 1960s. This paradox notwithstanding, ultimately within this acceptance of the male leadership was a stronger belief that the struggle was for both sexes, and its resolution depended on unified action under strong leadership. Many black southern women looked to the strong male leadership, not for their local initiatives, but to bring these local attempts at reform to the public and federal eye. Thus, while black women were striving for rights equal to white citizens in America, some white women were challenging the very equality to which the black people aspired.

Many of these white women saw their contributions to the Movement as being guided by male assumptions regarding the role of women in political organizations. Thus, when women chose to deviate from the areas of clerical work, teaching,  

and voter registration that had been assigned to them by the male leaders, some of the SNCC organizers questioned the woman's value to the success of the project. According to the sociologist Doug McAdam, 41 percent of the applicants to the Project were women, and 52 percent were rejected. Of the 59 percent of male applicants 48 percent were rejected. There is not a huge difference in these figures, but what is significant is the reasons why students were rejected. McAdam noted that men screened applicants, and they had a tendency to emphasize the physical attractiveness of the female student and to discriminate against women whose applications revealed an unwillingness to perform clerical duties. 20

The latent discriminations revealed by McAdam's findings were realities faced by black and white women in the Movement. The more senior female members of SNCC had not had to fill out application forms, but the assumptions concerning their designated administrative tasks were the same. In 1964 some of those senior female members, Ella Baker, Mary King, Cathy Cade, and others, staged a half-serious sit-in to protest the secretarial duties which women were always given. This light-hearted demonstration was not the zenith of feminist action; neither was it a culmination of years of discontent. What the sit-in demonstrated was that women who had helped in the formation of SNCC and other organizations in COFO did not wish their skills to be taken for granted, and, more importantly,

20 McAdam, 61.
they did not want the movement to suffer for lack of utilizing
the skills of women who were willing to take on roles which
were not necessarily congruent with the prevailing ideology of
womanhood.

In her autobiography Freedom Song, Mary King, one of the
founding members of SNCC, argues that the sit-in was
misrepresented by Civil Rights historians who ascribed a
greater feminist significance to this sit-in than did the
participants themselves. King argues that, in fact, any
internal complaints within SNCC were geared towards the
improvement of the organization itself and not towards the
realization of personal or gender-specific goals. King feels
that the arguments of white women were misunderstood partly
because of the changing ideologies within SNCC as white women
gravitated toward feminism and blacks toward Black
Consciousness. 21 Although King makes an important point,
and a significant ideological change was developing at the
same time as feminist consciousness, the Black Consciousness
of black political activism was not really new. Black men and
women fighting for Black community development was a part of
the Black Women's Clubs' credo of "Lifting As We Climb." The
developing Black Power movement was modern phraseology for
a concerted effort on the part of black people to develop
their own system of social, political, economic, and cultural
autonomy. Where white women were becoming more gender

21 King, 459.
specific, the young black people in the Movement were becoming more race specific. Thus while black people were uniting on a policy with the definite objective of black autonomy, white women, moving towards a more feminist orientation, were beginning to find themselves alienated from the changing sentiments of the Movement. They could not successfully unite with black women against sexism and were facing an ideological shift that would exclude white people (men and women) from the main black student political organization in America. As Sara Evans argued, "White woman's position--at the nexus of sexual and racial conflicts--had become increasingly precarious."22

CHAPTER III

"Different Ends Of The Spectrum"

The Mississippi Summer Project was a result of integrated political alliances between black Civil Rights organizations and white, northern volunteers. The nature of the Project was such that volunteers were encouraged to consider all types of social injustice and began to see racism as one aspect of discriminatory American politics. Subsequently, the actual focus of the student movement widened to encompass a variety of political opinions and liberation campaigns.

Sexism and gender politics, as previously examined, was one of the issues that gained momentum during the 1964 Project. A few white volunteers were gradually shifting towards a gender determinism, partly as a result of the discrimination they had faced as women in the student political movement. For these volunteers, after being made aware of their own oppression, a more gender specific focus was a logical progression in terms of a political agenda that addressed their own needs. It was also a logical progression that their particular viewpoint should be representative of the racial ethos of the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, it was
understandable that these volunteers would want to include black women to participate in their burgeoning feminist movement.

These actions, though logical in terms of white women's activism, in terms of the history of black activism were potentially divisive. The spirit of womanpower and the community consciousness of black women's activism could not easily ally with the changing political priorities of the white feminist caucus. Such an alliance could only alienate black women from the traditional male/female unity of black community activism and divide the black community's political energies.

After the Summer Project, SNCC workers organized a retreat where they could consider the direction of the Movement, assess the gains they had made, and plan for a more effective future. The conference was held in Waveland, Mississippi, in November 1964. Out of the Waveland Retreat came position papers and statements of intent which heralded the advent of new political alliances and agendas. The political sophistication of the presentations showed the increasing importance of ideology within the Movement. The papers demanded recognition of all points of view and expressions against oppression.

Of the many workshops held at Waveland, one of the most controversial and perhaps the most influential, was the workshop on the role of women within SNCC. The workshop was
not the first time that SNCC members had discussed this subject, but it was perhaps the first time that the issue of women as a separate political group was publicly considered. Out of the workshop came a paper that reflected conversations and realizations prior to and during the retreat. Two white women, Mary King and Casey Hayden, presented the anonymously written document. The very fact that the authors were reluctant to acknowledge their work suggests that they sensed some hostility, perhaps not toward themselves but to a recognition of their "oppression" as a valid political concern. The paper, as the authors expected, was received with derision by male members of SNCC, garnering only a polite acknowledgment from James Forman who was chair of the retreat. Entitled SNCC POSITION PAPER (Women in the Movement), the paper likened the second-class position of women in the Movement to the second-class position of blacks in American society. ¹ This was not the first paper to make such an analogy. During the early years of the struggle for women's suffrage many leading white activist depicted themselves as sharing a political identity with the Negro man, so much so that they were eager to ally themselves with radical abolitionists in order to force America to enfranchise both these oppressed groups. Thus, drawing parallels between black men and white women was not new; however, what was quite new in the Position Paper was the use of that analogy to discuss

¹ See Appendix 1.
a shared oppression between white and black women. The Position Paper was an attempt to move towards an inter-racial gender alliance using the old analogy of black male and white female political inferiority. It raised questions about the male dominance in leadership positions, the tendency to give women the clerical duties, and the condescending attitude toward women and their contributions to the Movement. From the Position Paper and the whole feeling of sexism which it aimed to address came significant points that revealed the huge gap between the aims of women and men, and more significantly, for this paper, between black and white women.

Sara Evans rightly argues that the Position Paper has been erroneously attributed to Ruby Doris Robinson, a black Project Director and founding member of SNCC.² It is highly improbable that the finished version of this paper would have received the whole-hearted endorsement of any black woman in the Movement as it discusses the attitude of men to women in a way which shows white women's acceptance of the black matriarchal stereotype. The very fact that white women looking for an inter-racial sorority could attempt to understand the roots of black men's sexism as a consequence of having probably "recently broken away from a matriarchal framework" suggested that white women were aiming to attack the sexism of black men, using their perceptions of black matriarchy as part

of their reasoning. For the purpose of the Position Paper, the black woman was presented as a dominant force who created an atmosphere that arrested men's ability to discuss gender roles. The idea that men would have needed to break away from a matriarchal framework hints at an imprisonment in an alienating family structure. Perhaps the most disturbing thing in the Paper was that the mention of matriarchy was simply that: a mere mention that was both an inclusion of an accepted given and an indication of the cultural polarization of black and white women. From the acceptance of the notion of black matriarchy, the white authors showed that they accepted a stereotype that had been very damaging to the image of the black woman. Using this myth of matriarchy to present their argument, the white women revealed that their understanding and appreciation of the black woman's struggle was still very shallow. More importantly, such ignorance indicated that a black/white gender coalition based on equality or even on parity could not exist when white women had such inaccurate cultural perceptions of black women.

The Position Paper was presented one year before the publication of Daniel Moynihan's controversial report on the Negro family. In his analysis Moynihan blamed the female-headed household for undermining the black man and introduced

a theme that would castigate the black woman as stultifying the black man in all aspects of his social, political, and economic development. The widespread acceptance of Moynihan's view takes on greater significance when seen in the light of assumptions of white women months before the publication of his report.

A second point of interest rising from the Position Paper concerns the fact that the white women felt that they were speaking on behalf of women who were "as unaware and insensitive to this subject" as were their male "oppressors." This was a valid observation that struck at the heart of the reason why a black/white women's coalition was impossible at that time. This attempt to speak out to and speak up for the unknowingly exploited black woman revealed the huge gap between black and white women. Speaking on behalf of black women whom they thought of as being ignorant of their own oppression, the white women seemed to assume a superior understanding of a struggle which they themselves recognized as being between black men and women. Black women could regard this assumption on the part of their white colleagues as condescending and "paternalistic." They chose, at this time, to see the whole sexism debate as a divisive issue which addressed white concerns but which could have a damaging effect on gender relations within the black community. The document "exploited the passion, ambition, and vigor of the
black movement," and in its rhetoric the authors were able to evade "the harsh fact of white women's racism." ⁴

A third aspect of the document was the fact that white women were telling black women that the people who were both leading them and marching alongside them in their quest for freedom were as much their oppressors as was the racist power structure. Black women could not accept this view. This analysis challenged the heritage of community activism that black men and women had shared. If black women were to abandon their alliance with black men, they would have no other group with whom they could forge an alliance. White women were fighting patriarchy—the power of men to shape society and oppress women. Black women were not just fighting the patriarchy but the whole white power structure which included white men and white women.

Despite the camaraderie and indeed the inter-racial sorority which made the Summer Project politically and culturally enlightening, there were tensions between black and white women. These were born not out of separatist ideology and dogma but of the polarity between black and white historical experiences. The ambitious goals of the Civil Rights Movement in general, and the Summer Project in particular, of promoting cultural heterogeneity would take

time. White women would have to gain a clearer understanding of the historical legacy of the activism that had shaped the black women's political responses before claiming parity and shared oppression. Blacks had experienced racial discrimination from both men and women, and black women had no historical precedent for guarantee of white women's support. The novelist Toni Morrison has argued that white women in America "sustained an eloquent silence during the times of greatest stress." 5 By the end of the Summer Project and certainly after the Waveland retreat in November, black women began to see some white women as using the Civil Rights Movement as a launching pad for their own movement of liberation from their restrictive middle-class security.

In her autobiography Mary King remarks on her incredulity at the lack of support given to herself and Casey Hayden when they presented the Paper.

The Black women of SNCC were slow to respond to our missives. While some had reacted with indifference or antagonism to the 1964 anonymous Waveland Position Paper, others were interested but appeared reluctant to speak out.6

The fact that black women did not support the arguments in the Position Paper, nor the feminist movement for which it provided an important agenda of immediate concerns, shows that the feminist movement, although it owed much of its evolution

6 King, 462.
to the Civil Rights Movement, could not take on the issues of race and sex in a manner that would meet the needs of black women. And this was perhaps the greatest assumption of the whole movement: that the dichotomy of experience in the political, social, and economic spheres could be overcome in one summer by hopeful volunteers. This belief demanded that black women challenge black men, at a time when contemporary sociological thought and, indeed, the ideas of many black leaders stressed the importance of black manhood and castigated the "dominance" of women as adding to the black male's victimization in a racist system.

Less than ten weeks after the Waveland Retreat, Casey Hayden and Mary King wrote a "kind of memo" addressed to "a number of other women in the peace and freedom movements." This document, directed to SNCC and to other political organizations, was circulated to particular white women across the country who were known for their activism for women's rights. A few copies of the memo had been sent to black women. Whilst all the white women gave positive responses to the memo, neither King nor Hayden received any acknowledgement of the document from black women. The document's effect among white women was quite astounding in that it provided an agenda around which feminists could unite. In December 1965 at the Student for a Democratic Society (SDS) conference in

7" Sex and Caste: A kind of memo from Casey Hayden and Mary King to a number of other women in the peace and freedom movements," in Evans, Personal Politics, 236-238.
Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, women who had previously studied the document staged a walk-out and after they left the conference floor formed a women's caucus to discuss seriously the issue of sexism within student organizations. The memo helped in the establishment of consciousness raising groups, and as Janis Kelly of Cornell University told King, "The radical segment of the women's movement tracks directly back to your memo."  

There was no paper written or presented by a black woman's caucus during the Waveland Retreat. Perhaps one of the first attempts by a black Summer Project volunteer to look at the subject of sexism came in 1977, in an article written by Cynthia Washington, who had been a Project Director in Mississippi. Having been written with the hindsight of thirteen years, this report cannot be compared directly with the Position Paper of the 1964 retreat. However, the document is a valid reflection of the views of black women in the movement at the time.

Unlike white women who were arguing about the lack of women in leadership roles, Washington says that she did not see her work as a Project Director as being in any way exceptional. In fact, she goes further to suggest that the community in which she worked respected women for their endurance, their skills, and their abilities. This claim put

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8 King, 466.
9 See Appendix 2.
her at odds with the observations laid out in King and Hayden's Position Paper. However, she remarks that the very skills and abilities that gained the respect of fellow workers were the attributes that rendered the women almost sexless and thus placed them in "some category other than female." Perhaps this was one reason why black men were so scathing about black women's involvement in the debate about sexism. Their attitudes toward black women in the Movement gave the women a sexual neutrality, which by definition did not warrant concerns about sexist oppression.

In an article on "The Dilemmas of Black Females in Leadership," sociologist Rhetaugh Graves Dumas argues that the stereotypical image of the black woman depicts someone who has a unique capacity for leadership. Dumas sees the dilemma in the expectations which spring from this image and the "de-professionalizing" effect on the work of black women. 10 It is ironic that this one aspect of the stereotype of black women was not fully utilized in a movement where all organizational skills would have been beneficial and productive. To add to Washington's analysis it could be argued that while men in the Movement respected the work of women, the very tasks which the women were invited to take on meant that they stayed within the accepted gender roles and concentrated on things like the Freedom Schools and

administration. The men, on the other hand, in taking on the more specifically dangerous and high-profile tasks like door-to-door voter registration in the rural areas, were in a position to gain more "battle scars" and consequently expect and accept the greater amount of praise and recognition for the duties they performed. Although this point was not included in the SNCC Position Paper on women, it was a significant reason why women felt unappreciated and underutilized. The point should be stressed that the very existence of these "battle-scars" allowed men to feel that the concerns of women were minor and relatively insignificant.

Washington's second observation connects with one of the points made in the SNCC Position Paper on women—that is, that some women were unaware of the sexual oppression which pervaded the movement. Concerning the "ignorance" of women about the issue of sexism, Washington simply states that the "single-minded focus on the issues of racial discrimination and the black struggle for equality blinded us to other issues ..."

The feminist movement of the white woman moved towards a feminist consciousness that challenged all men regardless of race. Black women remained within the framework of their own kind of female consciousness that supported black men because of race. This racial identity was crucial to black men and women, and they could not easily assume that Civil Rights gains had totally eradicated racism in America. The immediate
successes of the Civil Rights Movement were something that well-meaning white activists were apt to take for granted, as is revealed in Casey Hayden's introduction to Mary King's autobiography *Freedom Song*, where Hayden talks about the camaraderie of the SNCC days. Hayden says that volunteers were united in their goal for freedom and "simply dropped race." Although Hayden is speaking of the efforts to transcend prejudice in order to achieve a unity of human beings, there is a chilling literal truth in her statement. In the area of black/white gender coalition, white women were willing simply to drop race, as though the Movement had neatly dealt with that area of liberation politics. Black women could not so easily package their racial-gender political activity. As the black feminist writer Bell Hooks argues:

> It is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of their racial identity.¹¹

For black women the transition from one aspect of liberation politics to another could not be so easily navigated. The legacy of black women's activism was structured by great need in the face of severe oppression. Moreover, as the historian Jacqueline Jones argues, the "ideology of black feminism sprang not from abstract theoretical

formulations but from self-scrutiny and self-understanding."  

Very few black women or, indeed, black women's organizations had worked from strategies based on a black feminist ideology; black womanpower was based on female organization for community service. The idea of womanpower directed solely to the needs of black women as a gender group did not coincide with the traditions of black women's activism. Thus, in terms of formulating an ideological framework or even setting up discussion groups, "black women had nothing to fall back on." The idea of black men and women working toward the one goal of community improvement was the whole concept of womanpower that had inspired the activism of black women in the 1950s and the early 1960s. As Fannie Lou Hamer argued when she spoke at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund Institute in 1971:

We're in this bag together. Not to fight to try to liberate ourselves from the men, this is another trick to get us fighting among ourselves, but to work together with the black man.

This point of view was shared by the older Movement workers as well as the younger, more militant black women. In an interview

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13 Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Liberation," 64.

with the *Black Scholar* in the same year, Kathleen Cleaver made the same point:

> The basic enemy of the black woman is not her own man because her man, the black man, is not the creator or perpetrator of the system that is dedicated to oppressing women. However, as black men move to assert themselves, to regain a sense of dignity, manhood, and humanity to become strong and powerful enough to fight against the oppressor, they many times take out their resentment of their position against their own black women.\(^{15}\)

Mary King has charged historian Sara Evans with imposing a "later feminist construction on a period of ferment"\(^{16}\) in her analysis of the SNCC Position Paper, but when looking at womanpower, it is imperative that one understands the duality of black women's activism: the gender bonding to galvanize action towards community progress. During the era of the Civil Rights Movement black women were concerned with the health of the black community and had not reached a point where they felt they could isolate the question of their own gender oppression. The sociologist Joyce Ladner saw this view as still being a major part of the consciousness of black women, when she wrote in 1971:

> Black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, but rather the enemy is considered to be the oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate Black men, women and children. A preoccupation with the equalization of roles between Black men and women is almost irrelevant


\(^{16}\) King, 459.
when one places it within the context of total priorities related to the survival of the race.¹⁷

Ladner argues that questioning male/female roles was "almost irrelevant," and in terms of the majority of black women who worked in local community organizations for civil rights this was the case. However, by virtue of a shared historical experience black women had become passive partners in coalitions with both black men and with white women, before ever gaining their own political bases. They had been active in all aspects of the Civil Rights struggle, but "their full leadership potential got lost amidst White feminism, Black Power, social science, and poverty programs." ¹⁸

In the aftermath of the Waveland Retreat, black women were faced with two demands on their political consciences; they were almost in a position of having to choose which was the greater of the two evils: racism or sexism. They had been challenged to polarize their oppression when the whole structure of Civil Rights activism had been one of unity against oppression without the delineation of specific issues within the black community. In an interview with Alice Walker, Coretta Scott-King said that black women were reluctant to


¹⁸ Giddings, 350.
liberate themselves without considering men.\textsuperscript{19} Others would go further to say that as blacks, men and women could not separate their struggle.\textsuperscript{20}

The success and durability of womanpower lay in its insistence on the unity of the black community in the face of racial oppression. Womanpower did not rule out the discussion of gender politics within the black community, but the internal confrontation of sexism would have to take second place to the external confrontation of racial discrimination.


CONCLUSION

The Civil Rights Movement was indeed about a new political, social, and cultural agenda, and black women through their own improvised system of protest used womanpower to confront the American power structure. As the determination of the Women's Political Council in Montgomery, Alabama, and the Mississippi women in Womanpower Unlimited revealed, black women felt that their double oppression gave them both cause and opportunity for serious political challenge. The discrimination that black people faced was such that it could only be articulated through a Movement led by black people fighting together for their own liberation. This black unity was not a contrived political vehicle but an established tradition of black activism. For black women, therefore, the Civil Rights Movement was not about intra-racial gender dialectics, but about challenging the white political hegemony that defined the tenor of black life in America.

By the end of the Mississippi Summer Project the community consciousness of black women's activism had been challenged by a few white women in the Movement who saw gender oppression as a growing priority for all women in the Movement. Black women were not unaware of sexism and the treatment of women in society but, unlike the white women,
they did not see male supremacy as the basis of their oppression, rather they considered it to be a symptom of a discriminatory political system. An analysis based solely on sexism omitted the vital consideration of racial oppression that blanketed all aspects of black life in America. Without consideration of racism as black women's greatest oppression, the white feminist movement did not appeal to black women as a movement for their liberation. As Giddings argues,

The image of the women's movement ranged from that of middle-class women with little history of racial sensitivity, to a radical fringe that advocated the view that male supremacy rather than white supremacy was the root of oppression.58

These white volunteers who developed a feminist consciousness throughout the Movement, looked to Civil Rights activism as a political prototype for their own movement. In a very broad sense, in inviting black women's involvement, those white feminists mirrored the example of the early suffragists of the 1860s who cut their political teeth on the abolitionist movement and from that, went on to make suffrage their priority. These young feminists, like the suffragists one hundred years earlier, did not deliberately set out to polarize their political endeavors but, as they saw it, simply exercised their legitimate right to recognize and fight for their own rights.

58 Giddings, 304.
The young black women in the Movement, as much as they were a part of the same national climate for political change, had an older and stronger alliance with the black men and women of their own communities. Like their own black forerunners one hundred years previously, the young black women could not accept the white women's gender determinism. They could not make alliances with any organization which failed to recognize the insidious influence of race in the stultification of black community development. Black women had to distinguish between opposing all men and opposing the male dominated white power structure. In so doing they found that their closest, most faithful allies were black men.

What Temma Kaplan describes as "community consciousness," the sociologist Vivian Gordon describes as the "collective nature of black women's self-definitions." Gordon goes on to say that in the traditions of their own activism, black women are saying: "the structure is wrong. It works against us as Black people." Gordon concludes, "Viewing the structure to consistently say 'get back, you're black,' African American women have clearly identified racism as the primary evil to attack." 59 Ultimately, black women were not concerned with alliances based on feminist consciousness but on offensives and programs that would support black community development in America.

59 Vivian Gordon, Black Women, Feminism, And Black Liberation (Chicago: Third World Press,1987), 45.
APPENDIX 1

SNCC POSITION PAPER (Women in the Movement)

(Name Withheld by Request, November 1964)

1. Staff was involved in crucial constitutional revisions at the Atlanta staff meeting in October. A large committee was appointed to present revisions to the staff. The committee was all men.

2. Two organizers were working together to form a farmers league. Without asking any questions, the male organizer immediately assigned the clerical work to the female organizer although both had equal experience in organizing campaigns.

3. Although there are women in Mississippi project who have been working as long as some of the men, the leadership group in COFO is all men.

4. A woman in a field office wondered why she was held responsible for day to day decisions, only to find out later that she had been appointed project director but not told.

5. A Fall 1964 personnel and resources report on Mississippi projects lists the number of people in each project. The section on Laurel, however, lists not the number of persons, but "three girls."

6. One of SNCC's main administrative officers apologizes for appointment of a woman as interim project director in a key Mississippi project area.

7. A veteran of two years' work for SNCC in two states spends her day typing and doing clerical work for other people in her project.
8. Any woman in SNCC, no matter what her position or experience, has been asked to take minutes in a meeting when she and other women are outnumbered by men.

9. The names of several new attorneys entering a state project this past summer were posted in a central movement office. The first initial and last name of each lawyer was listed. Next to one name was written: (girl).

10. Capable, responsible, and experienced women who are in leadership positions can expect to have to defer to a man on their project for final decisionmaking.

11. A session at the recent October staff meeting in Atlanta was the first large meeting in the past couple of years where a woman was asked to chair.

Undoubtedly this list will seem strange to some, petty to others, laughable to most. The list could continue as far as there are women in the movement. Except that most women don't talk about these kinds of incidents, because the whole subject is [not] discussable-strange to some, petty to others, laughable to most. The average white person finds it difficult to understand why the Negro resents being called "boy," or being thought of as "musical" and "athletic," because the average white person doesn't realize that he assumes he is superior. And naturally he doesn't understand the problem of paternalism. So too the average SNCC worker finds it difficult to discuss the woman problem because of the assumption of male superiority. Assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro. Consider why it is in SNCC that women who are competent, qualified, and experienced, are automatically assigned to the "female" kinds of jobs such as typing, desk work, telephone work, filing, library work, cooking, and the assistant kind of administrative work but rarely the "executive" kind.

The woman in SNCC is often in the same position as that token Negro hired in a corporation. The management thinks that it has done its bit. Yet, every day the Negro bears an atmosphere, attitudes and actions which are tinged with condescension and paternalism, the most telling of which are when he is not promoted as the equally or less skilled whites are. This paper is anonymous. Think about the kinds of things the author, if made known, would have to suffer because of raising this kind of discussion. Nothing so final as being fired or outright exclusion, but the kinds of things which are
This paper is presented anyway because it needs to be made known that many women in the movement are not "happy and contented" with their status. It needs to be made known that much talent and experience are being wasted by this movement when women are not given jobs commensurate with their abilities. It needs to be known that just as Negroes were the crucial factor in the economy of the cotton South, so too in SNCC, women are the crucial factor that keeps the movement running on a day-to-day basis. Yet they are not given equal say-so when it comes to day-to-day decisionmaking. What can be done? Probably nothing right away. Most men in this movement are probably too threatened by the possibility of serious discussion on this subject. Perhaps this is because they have recently broken away from a matriarchal framework under which they may have grown up. Then too, many women are as unaware and insensitive to this subject as men, just as there are many Negroes who don't understand that they are not free or who want to be part of white America. They don't understand that they have to give up their souls and stay in their place to be accepted. So too, many women, in order to be accepted by men, or men's terms, give themselves up to that caricature of what a woman is - unthinking, pliable, an ornament to please the man.

Maybe the only thing that can come out of this paper is discussion - amidst the laughter - but still discussion. (Those who laugh the hardest are often those who need the crutch of male supremacy the most.) And maybe sometime in the future the whole of the women in this movement will become so alert as to force the rest of the movement to stop the discrimination and start the slow process of changing values and ideas so that all of us gradually come to understand that this is no more a man's world than it is a white world.

APPENDIX 2

"WE STARTED FROM DIFFERENT ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM"

by Cynthia Washington

During the fall of 1964, I had a conversation with Casey Hayden about the role of women in SNCC. She complained that all the women got to do was type, that their role was limited to office work no matter where they were. What she said didn't make any particular sense to me because, at the time, I had my own project in Bolivar County, Miss. A number of other black women also directed their own projects. What Casey and other white women seemed to want was an opportunity to prove they could do something other than office work. I assumed that if they could do something else, they'd probably be doing that.

I remember driving back to Mississippi in my truck, thinking how crazy they were. I couldn't understand what they wanted. As far as I could see, being a project director wasn't much fun. I didn't realize then that having my own project made a lot of difference in how I was perceived and treated. And I did not see what I was doing as exceptional. The community women I worked with on projects were respected and admired for their strength and endurance. They worked hard in the cotton fields or white folks' houses, raised and supported their children, yet still found the time and energy to be involved in struggle for their people. They were typical rather than unusual.

Certain differences result from the way in which black women grow up. We have been raised to function independently. The notion of retiring to housewifery someday is not even a reasonable fantasy. Therefore whether you want to or not, it is necessary to learn to do all of the things required to survive. It seemed to many of us, on the other hand, that white women were demanding a chance to be independent while we needed help and assistance which was not always forthcoming. We definitely started from opposite ends of the spectrum.

I remember discussions with various women about our treatment as one of the boys and its impact on us as women. We did the same work as men - organizing around voter registration and community issues in rural areas - usually
with men. But when we finally got back to some town where we could relax and go out, the men went out with other women. Our skills and abilities were recognized and respected, but that seemed to place us in some category other than female. Some years later, I was told by a male SNCC worker that some of the project women had made him feel superfluous. I wish he had told me that at the time because the differences in the way women were treated certainly did add to the tension between black and white women.

At a district meeting in Mississippi, I heard Stokely's comment that the only position of women in SNCC was prone — with the exception of women who either dressed or looked like men. I was standing next to Muriel Tillinghast, another project director, and we were not pleased. But our relative autonomy as project directors seemed to deny or override his statement. We were proof that what he said wasn't true — or so we thought. In fact, I'm certain that our single-minded focus on the issues of racial discrimination and the black struggle for equality blinded us to other issues.

In the late 1960s, some black women were "producing children for the black nation," while others began to see themselves as oppressed by black men. For many, black women were the most oppressed group in American society, the victims of racism chauvinism and class discrimination. Chauvinism was often seen as the result of forces acting upon all black people, and struggle between black men and women as an effective way to keep us from working together for our common liberation. On the other hand, my son by this time was three years old; I was divorced, and the thought that anyone would want to have a child to support by themselves seemed like a mean joke. If women were becoming pregnant to counter the charge that they took "manhood" away, then the position of black women, even in movement circles, seemed to have deteriorated. To me, it was not a matter of whether male/female oppression existed but one of priorities. I thought it more important to deal with the folks and the system which oppressed both black women and black men.

The white people I talked with often assumed the basic necessities. That gave them the luxury of debating ideology and many things I felt would not change the position of black women. Abortion, which white women were fighting for, did not seem an important issue for black women. Women who already had children might need abortion in the future, but in the present they needed a means to support children other than welfare, a system of child care, decent homes and medical attention, opportunities for meaningful employment and continuing education. Again, we found ourselves in different
circumstances with no program or tactic to begin building sisterhood.

Over the last two years, I find myself becoming more involved with women in Washington, discussing the impact of race, class, and culture on us all and concrete ways women can help each other survive. I also find that the same black women I knew and respected during the 1960s are in the process of re-forming a network. Most of us have now spent the greater part of our adult lives as single women involved in movement activities. We have been married, divorced, some have children; we have gone from town to town, job to job, talking to each other. The problems of womanhood have had an increasing impact on us, and the directions of our own, of my own, involvement in the women's movement are still unfolding.

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