Sexism and the Invisibility of Women Activists in the Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

The Civil Rights Movement, built on the premise of equality and the empowerment of black Americans, struggled to provide the same rights and sense of empowerment to its women activists. Prominent leaders and activists like Ella Baker and Septima Clark provide clear examples of the importance of both women activists and their work within the Civil Rights Movement as well as the importance of the bottom up perspective in highlighting the experiences of women within the movement. Women like Ella Baker and Septima Clark frequently served as influential and critical leaders. Yet these women have often been situated as “mothers,” “grandmothers,” and “behind-the-scenes” activists, both because of their gender and their age. These descriptions served as a way not to describe the types of activism they actually engaged in, but rather as a way to situate them within “safe” rather than radical roles. By analyzing their own stories, it becomes clear that sexism within the movement did not go unacknowledged nor were the responses of women to sexism monolithic. Ultimately, these women and their experiences serve to represent the ways in which sexism effected women activists within the Civil Rights Movement, while also serving as examples of the ways in which women responded to sexism.