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

Jennifer Hollmer
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
History Department: Honors Thesis Abstract and Proposal
November 9, 2015
Sexism and the Invisibility of Women Activists in the Civil Rights Movement

Popular understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, drawing from a top-down narrative, focuses on iconic figures, big events, and institutions of major influence, such as the federal government. This perspective limits the understanding of daily life for those involved in the movement, painting a portrait that instead suggests that only key figures and events were necessary to the success of the movement. In reality, the Civil Rights Movement relied heavily upon grassroots activism and the work of people who are now relatively unknown to the public. Even those well known have often suffered from a whitewashed version of history. Rosa Parks supposedly only sat down because she was “tired” and her feet hurt and then refused to give up said seat. This retelling of the event fails to acknowledge Park’s work as an activist for nearly two decades prior to the boycott. It also suggests that she was a docile and unassuming woman, that she was not an activist, but simply a tired old woman faced with a horrible injustice. Rosa Parks’ future following the Montgomery Bus Boycott goes unmentioned, despite her continuing her activism.

My thesis attempts to refocus the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement into one of a bottom-up perspective, highlighting women’s work and its importance to the Civil Rights Movement. I argue that sexism decreased the visibility of women activists and their work, which was essential to the movement and its success. Using interviews, newspapers, and books from the period, I will explore the reality of daily life for activists within the movement. By examining sources on the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, I will investigate the language used to talk about the role of women. Scholarly sources contribute heavily to the framing of my thesis. The bottom-up perspective and less structured nature of when civil right activism began in my thesis are in-line with current scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement.
Additionally, secondary sources provide new questions and definitions for activism, while also providing new perspective on women activists' attempts to empower themselves. Ultimately, I am attempting to reframe the way one views the Civil Rights Movement and the women activists involved.