

**Black Women in Leadership Positions on Different  
Levels of the SNCC between 1960-1964:  
The Formation of Their Activism**

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## **Abstract**

The grand civil rights narrative of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States almost solely focusses on black men, even though research proves that black women were at least as important as men in the fight for equal racial rights. This research aims to create a more inclusive grand civil rights narrative, by exploring a different side of leadership and organization through the analysis of how black female activists in leadership positions in the SNCC from 1960 to 1964, were influenced by social control in their civil rights work, and how they shaped their own activism. This is done by looking at the influence of concepts such as gender and class, and how they create limitations and prescriptions for black women in the 1960s, and how black female activists themselves dealt with these notions. The results of this research and its three case studies, show that black women were all limited in different ways on their different levels of activism, but that they were all able to work around their limitations, to create new meanings for the concepts of leadership and womanhood in the 1960s.

## **Key Words**

Civil Rights Movement, SNCC, race, gender, black female activism, leadership.

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## Introduction

When asking someone about the American Civil Rights Movement, the movement that targeted racial inequality and discrimination mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the name Martin Luther King Jr. is usually the first one mentioned. My parents turned out to know Malcom X as well, and when talking about black civil rights with my international and even American friends, the names they mentioned were also often limited to the male gender. Rosa Parks was the one female name ever referred to, but in mentioning, always sketched as a frail, poor, old lady, and never once as an actual capable civil rights activist. I myself had never heard of any black female civil rights activist, except for maybe Rosa Parks, before I did a course on African American History at university last year. After this course, I realized that black women were actually much involved in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, and it struck me as odd that no one seems to know this. After doing research, it turns out that academics in this area, fortunately have been increasing their focus on the role of black women in this movement lately. Finding the Civil Rights Movement an interesting area of study, and wanting to contribute to rewriting the civil rights narrative in the most honest and inclusive way possible, I chose to create the following research question for my Bachelor's thesis:

*How did black women in leadership positions on different levels in the SNCC between 1960-1964 form their own activism, and how were they and their work influenced by social control?*

Especially in a time of police brutality and the Black Lives Matter Movement, it is important to look at and understand African American activism, and its history. To be able to build on the civil rights legacy and further the cause of equality, it is vital to understand the potential and power of both genders in past movements. This means including women in the narratives of the past, because women played significant parts in them. As the SNCC is one of the most prominent Civil Rights Organizations to this day, it is vital to show women's roles as powerful leaders and activists in this organization, as no research yet exists of how black women in the SNCC specifically functioned as leaders on different levels of this organization. By omitting the role of women as vital forces in the movement, only one side of leadership and organization within the movement is explored. The complexity of the movement itself, its structure and its success are furthermore diminished, when the scope of research is limited to only one gender. By doing research on black women in leadership positions in the SNCC,

new and important aspects of the Civil Rights Movement can be added to the grand narrative, such as the acknowledgement of sexism and gender discrimination in the movement, but also important notions such as female activism and leadership, and the meaning of womanhood in that time. Although research about black women has been increasing significantly, women are still underrepresented in the field of African American History, and without them, the main narrative of the Civil Rights Movement is incomplete and selective in its nature.

The SNCC, or fully written, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee was founded in 1960, to help coordinate the de-segregation of public facilities in the South. The SNCC as Civil Rights Organization was known for its youthful dynamism and its student-centered, non-hierarchical structure. The SNCC was led by students and therefore more inclusive regarding gender. Proportionally, the SNCC had many black women functioning as leaders in its organization. This is interesting, as the social impact of the power of gender dictated the public sphere in the time of the Civil Rights Movement as not a place suited for women, and definitely not for black women (Delinder 988). That black women were usually not labeled as proper activists, however, does not mean that they were not actively participating in Civil Rights Organizations. By looking at black women and their influence in leadership roles on different levels in an organization such as the SNCC, the questions of how women functioned in the movement, and to what extent they were important for the movement can be answered, creating a more complete grand narrative of the SNCC in the process.

For my framework on the SNCC and its structure, I will need to explain and define different concepts that are important to this thesis. The concept of the triple disadvantage that black women have, as they are seen as inferior in race, gender, and social class, will be important to use, as this theory adequately shows how different social concepts can interact and create social control and gender limitations. Sources such as “The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory 1830-1930” by Lengerman and Niebrugge, explains this notion and will therefore be consulted. Defining the notion of race will also be vital in this thesis, which is why I will look at Michael Omi’s and Howard Winant’s theory on race and what it means in the United States, in *Racial Formations in the United States*. “Gender and the Civil Rights Movement” by Jean Van Delinder is another example of an article I will use, as it creates a framework of interaction between the significant notions of gender and race, showing how the grand narrative will shift when women are included in their civil rights efforts. That black women are invisible in society and therefore also underrepresented in the grander civil rights narrative, an assumption vital to my research question, is also written

about by academics. “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” by Darlene Clarke Hine explains how black women are so disadvantaged in society, that they often adapt to a culture of dissemblance which requires them to be invisible to be able to safely function in a society built on a racial hierarchy. Specifically focusing on leadership and gender, A. I. T Kiser’s article “Workplace and Leadership Perceptions Between Men and Women”, will be helpful in my analysis of what is generally perceived as leadership and what varying definitions of leadership exist, especially when framed in the context of informal female leadership.

In my research, I have consciously chosen to look at the SNCC from 1960 to 1964. I have done this primarily to avoid the ongoing discussion in the field of African American Studies, of whether the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement should be labeled as distinct movements, are more closely interconnected, or maybe even part of the same movement. I have oriented myself on “The Long-Movement as a Vampire” by Cha-Jua and Lang, and on “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” by J.D. Hall. Both articles have valid arguments regarding the previously mentioned discussion. As academics themselves still highly disagree with each other on this topic, I have chosen to avoid the discussion altogether, as it seems too difficult to participate in, in a short Bachelor’s thesis. Only looking at the SNCC from 1960 to 1964 enables me to analyze this organization and its important black female members, without treading into the risky discussion of black power and a pro-longed movement, as SNCC only developed to be a Black Power Organization from 1964 onwards (Morgan et al. 93).

As much has been written about the SNCC, I am going to sketch a framework that develops from more general information about the SNCC, such as its founding and its principles, to a more specified focus on the organization’s internal structure. I will be using “The Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization” by Emily Stoper, because this article broadly sketches the history of the SNCC from its foundation to the point where the organization turned into a Black Power Movement. “From Sit-Ins to SNCC, the Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s” by Morgan and other academics, also sketches a broader framework of the SNCC and its foundation, but focuses on different aspects of the SNCC. One of these aspects is specifically about the internal structure of the SNCC, and will therefore be useful for my framework.

Next to sketching a framework of SNCC and its structure, I will need to orientate myself on the specific topic of women in the SNCC, and how the SNCC as an organization

dealt with black female activism. Again, I will start by sketching a larger framework of women in the SNCC, and will specify towards how black female activists were influenced by sexism and gender perceptions in their work within this organization. “The Women of SNCC: Struggle, Sexism, and the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness, 1960-66” by Dennis J. Urban will be my starting point, as it connects SNCC to female activism and feminist notions in a broader perspective. “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization” by Belinda Robnett, is an article which does not just sketch the history of women in the SNCC, but is more specified on the group’s female organization and leadership aspects. Bernice Barnett’s “Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class”, Lea E. Williams’s *Servants of the People: The 1960s Legacy of African American Leadership* and Anne Dingemans’s “Letting Their Voices be Heard: Black Female Activism in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s -1960”, are all sources that specifically focus on black female leaders in the movement, and therefore contain valuable information for my research.

After this introduction, my first chapter will serve as the framework for this thesis. As mentioned before, I will start by creating an outline of the SNCC as an organization, answering the sub questions of what the organization’s goals were, how it was different from other Civil Rights Organizations, and how its internal structure worked. In this chapter I aim to look at one of the most important sub questions of my thesis: In what ways does sexism play a role in the SNCC, and how does this influence its female members? The second, third and fourth chapter of this thesis will be case studies of important black women who functioned as leaders within the SNCC on different levels of the organization. In these chapters I will analyze each woman’s activism in the SNCC, and aim to answer my other main sub questions: What is the influence of gender on black female activism in the SNCC? and What is the influence of class on black female activism in the SNCC? These two questions are important to answer, because they will show how women were limited and influenced by social control in their activism. The notions of gender and class, however, often interact with each other and therefore there will be some overlap regarding these two questions. What concepts of gender and class will be analyzed differs per case study, as different concepts such as the culture of dissemblance, gender specific harassment, motherhood, marriage and feminism are relevant to different women. I will also ask the sub questions of how black women themselves thought about these notions, whether and why they



prioritized the fight for racial equality over the fight for gender equality, and how important they really were on their respective level of activism. By doing this, I furthermore aim to show how each of these women was able to create a new and personal model of womanhood.

I selected three women for my case studies on the following criteria: they had to be members of the SNCC, and they had to be vital forces in the movement between 1960 and 1964. I furthermore selected women who all worked on a different level in SNCC's organizational structure. My second chapter will therefore be about Ella Baker, who can be seen as a leader on the national level of the SNCC. The third chapter will be about Fannie Lou Hamer, who can be seen as a vital force at the local level of the SNCC, and the last chapter will be about Diane Nash, who started at a local level but worked herself up to a more national level of activism. None of these women were precisely limited to their levels of organization, but are chosen as case studies, because they are described as important in SNCC, and can be seen as mostly working on the levels just described. Finally, my conclusion will consider these three women and their activism, and compare them to each other.

## Chapter 1

### **SNCC: Structure & Gender Influence**

In a thesis researching the activism of women in leadership positions on different levels of the SNCC, the first logical step is to sketch a framework of the SNCC. In this framework, I will focus on the sub questions of what the SNCC's goals were, why the SNCC was different from other Civil Rights Organizations, and how its internal structure worked, which will be the first part of this chapter. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to explaining and defining the notions of race and gender, as these terms are vital to understand within the subject of women in a Civil Rights Organization. The framework of the SNCC and the definitions of race and gender will be fused in the last part of this chapter, where I will analyze in what ways and to what extent sexism was present in the SNCC. I will analyze how black women were able to work in the SNCC, what limited them, and what their own perceptions were of being female activists in this organization.

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, also known as “snick”, was a Civil Rights Organization founded in 1960, at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina (Dierenfield 57-58; Stoper 13; Morgan et al. vii). Mostly consisting out of students, the SNCC was founded with the main goal of desegregating public facilities in the South of the United States (Morgen et al. viii; Stoper 13). As is evident through their name, SNCC wanted to reach this goal of racial equality through nonviolence, because they deemed that to be the most effective strategy. As their statement of purpose says: “By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities” (SNCC). By organizing events such as sit-ins in 1960, coordinating Freedom Rides in 1961, and holding a voter registration in 1964 also known as the Mississippi Freedom Summer, SNCC ultimately changed America's racialized society, challenging the Jim Crow laws in the whole nation (Morgen et al. 3; Dierenfield 58; 65; 97).

It is vital is to understand that the SNCC was different from other, older Civil Rights Organizations, in how they campaigned: “lacking families to support, jobs to lose, or community status to uphold”(Morgan et al. 8), the many young members of SNCC felt themselves to be freer and bolder than their older counterparts in the civil rights struggle. Where, for instance, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

(NAACP) stated that once jailed after protest, African American activists should pay their bail and go home, the SNCC's stance was not to be compromised; their activists refused to pay and stayed in jail. The generation gap between the SNCC and older organizations, becomes evident through SNCC member John Lewis, as he stated that the older generation "just did not understand the essence of what we, the younger blacks of America, were doing" (Morgan et al. 11), showing how SNCC's youthful dynamism was vital to its unique character as an organization. SNCC "protested against the pace" of the fight against inequality, "rather than the direction of change" (Shor 174), favoring action instead of fighting inequality slowly through court. This leads to one of the SNCC's most significant accomplishment in the civil rights framework overall, as this organization helped kick-start a new era of civil rights in the 1960s. At this time many organizations had lost their momentum in the fight for equality, especially in the courts, where victories such as *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954, gave African Americans more rights and hopes for a better future (Morgan et al. 2).

Apart from national events the SNCC organized such as sit-ins, Freedom Rides and voter registrations, the SNCC also worked on a more local level, challenging inequality and racism in smaller communities by grassroots efforts, another area in which they differ from many other Civil Rights Organizations. Instead of doing "hit and run" campaigns, which left small communities to fend off racist confrontations on their own, after organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had used them to make headlines and left, SNCC stayed and helped out, fighting inequality on more than just the national level (Morgan et al. 8;82). As an important Civil Rights Organization, the SNCC is furthermore known for being more inclusive than other groups; not only could women in the SNCC claim certain leadership roles, but the SNCC also used a democratic structure of organization, with a group-centered leadership instead of a leader-centered group organization (Morgan et al. 8; Dierenfield 58). Their non-hierarchical leadership was different from that of for instance the SCLC or NAACP, which were mainly "led by lawyers and ministers" (Morgan et al. 8). As the SNCC did practice the belief of nonviolent action to reach their goals, and allowed non-colored people to join, both the SCLC and the NAACP tried to recruit the SNCC as a younger chapter of their own organizations. The SNCC's drastically different campaign methods and ideas about organization and leadership, however, prevented it from joining any other organization, and therefore remained an independent group. The SNCC did work closely with other groups to coordinate events, such as the NAACP, as this more experienced organization provided funds and advice (Morgan et al. 8;13;16; Dierenfield 58).

The actual membership of the SNCC is difficult to determine, as no list exists of all its members, and distinction should be made between people “on staff” and local volunteers helping out, as Stoper writers (qtd. in Morgan et al. 81;83). There was both activity on a national level, which sported a “large pantheon of individuals rather than one dominant leader” (Morgan et al. 81), and on a local level, where “each local group work[ed] principally with and address[ed] the needs of its immediate community” (Morgan et al. 81;83). Remarkable is, that among the SNCC members listed in “From Sit-ins to SNCC” as being well-known and important spokes persons on a national level, women are mentioned. Of a group of 24 names, nine are women, which is an exceptional large number. Among these nine women, Ella Baker and Diane Nash are both named, who, as I mentioned before, will play a bigger role in this thesis as case studies of women in leadership roles. Fannie Lou Hamer, my third case study, is also mentioned in the book as being a vital local force, especially in Mississippi (Morgan et al. 81-82).

Before, however, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Diana Nash and their roles of importance in leadership on different levels in the SNCC can be analyzed, a clear picture must be sketched of how black women themselves functioned within the SNCC, and how the gender perceptions of that time limited the roles that black women could play in the fight for equality. The first step in sketching the framework of how particularly black women were able to function in the SNCC, is defining the terms race and gender. It is important to look at these terms and what they mean in the United States, how they are defined and how they interact with each other and other influential social powers such as class (Delinder 987).

The term race, can be interpreted in many ways and can mean various different things. As a biological concept, race is nothing more than a difference in skin color and other innate, outside characteristics of body or face. Even though this definition is relevant to this thesis, as it is because of skin color that black people were discriminated by society, it is important to understand that race can also be viewed as a man-made construct, making race not solely a biological concept, but also a socio-historical one (Omi and Winant 4-5). In the United States specifically, racial formation has been vital to the meaning of the word race and therefore also to the oppression of certain ethnicities, as racial formation “refer[s] to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories” (Omi and Winant 5).

That the meaning and context regarding the term race changes over time, can be seen when interpreting race and its place in the history of the United States. In the colonial past,

race was perceived as a way to be able to mark someone nonwhite as “the other”. Someone whose existence as child of god was made questionable, to be able to maintain a certain order in society (Bhabha 18; Omi and Winant 3). This marking of race was furthermore used in order to justify the institution of slavery, and why certain people were slaves and others were not, maintaining a “color line” in a newly racialized society (Omi and Winant 7). After abolition and the modernization of society, race became a way of making sense of the world and its people in it. In this world, African Americans were not slaves anymore, but were still treated as an underclass of society, labeled as disorganized people with ineffective cultural and moral norms. This brings us to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Civil Rights Movement, as it was this movement that tried to shed this image of African Americans as an immoral underclass, and fought for equal treatment of all races under the law. Today, race in the United States remains to be an unstable and ever-changing concept (Omi and Winant 8;11).

In this thesis specifically, the word race will be defined as a socio-historical concept that has the important biological markers of mainly skin color, but also other biological characteristics. Remarkably, the United States, even though it has many citizens of mixed race, still makes no distinction between shades of blackness, as there are wide-ranging meanings of “black”, creating a binary system of race. White is deemed a “pure” skin color, which means that if you live in the United States and you have a non-white skin color, and are not obviously Native American, Latin or Asian, you are labeled to be black (Omi and Winant 4-6). In this thesis, this definition of blackness will be used, as this is the definition used in the United States and a better definition is lacking.

The notion of gender in the United States is, just like race, a complicated term. Gender, like race, is not just a set of biological characteristics that defines one to be male or female, but can also be seen as a socio-historic, man-made term, which has been a powerful shaper of public perceptions and notions about men and women in the course of history (Delinder 987). Due to the social impact of the power of gender, the public sphere in the time of the Civil Rights Movement was not seen as a place suited for women, because they were seen as lacking authority (Delinder 988; Lengermann and Niebrugge 11). Women were perceived as meant for the private sphere: taking care of the children and the house. This separation of spheres created an unequal balance of power in a society where men were privileged over women (Lengermann and Niebrugge 11). This created a situation in which black men were seen as superior to black women.

That women were seen as weak and subordinate, is a consequence of what is called the triple oppression of black women in American society (Nain 17; Benjamin 37). That black women were deemed inferior because of the color of their skin, but also because of their gender, caused them to also become inferior in the class system as well. This triple oppression shows that social concepts such as race or gender do not function on their own, but intersect and fuse together to form ideologies of inferiority (Delinder 987), which is vital to understand when dealing with social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement. Subsequently, “the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, [and] gender role differentiation” (Hine 915), forced black women to exist at the bottom class of a racialized society, leaving them with little authority over their own lives and bodies. Black women were not seen as actual ladies, or as possessing real womanhood, because they were black. Domestic and sexual abuse was common in black households, and black women’s reproductive and political rights were furthermore tightly monitored and limited by a privileged, white mainstream society (Delinder 987; Hine 915). As a result, many black women adopted to a culture of dissemblance, in which they adapted themselves to a cult of secrecy. Only by becoming invisible in the larger society could black women work effectively, be good mothers and deal with the violence, abuse, and frequent unemployment of their partners, in a “clearly hostile white, patriarchal, middle-class America” (Hine 915-916).

That black women had to deal with the triple oppression of race, gender and class, were home to a culture of dissemblance, and were seen as unfit for the public sphere, makes it clear as to why it was not easy being a black female activist in the time of the Civil Rights Movement, let alone be a female activist in a leadership position. Women working specifically in the ranks of the SNCC, however “toiled as much as, if not more than, any male member of SNCC” (Urban 185). Black women primarily worked behind the scenes, doing vital jobs such as feeding and caring for SNCC workers locally during campaigns, and serving as role models and surrogate mothers, as many black women preferred doing fieldwork (Robnett 1675; Urban 187). Women who became active members in the Civil Rights Movement, supported each other in numerous ways. Often also being mothers and wives, women needed each other to be able to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. Taking care of each other’s children, sharing activist responsibilities and even supporting each other financially, was done to ensure that being a female activist was possible (Dingemans 49). This support system was highly needed to take on the public sphere, but was also a necessary element for black women to cope with their personal lives. As mentioned before, black

women often dealt with rape and domestic violence. This, together with the threat of harassment and violence from whites that came with being an active female in a Civil Rights Movement, black women had an increasingly hard time staying safe. Remarkable is, that black women outnumbered black men in the Civil Rights Movement, but always receded to the background after initiating action, because men dominated the public platform (Robnett 1677).

That there was sexism present among the ranks of SNCC which limited the roles women could play as activists in the organization, is something most theorists agree on. To what extent this sexism influenced the members of SNCC, is still a strongly debated topic. In what way black women, for instance, could be leaders, depends on the definition of leadership one uses, as the word leadership in itself has already been influenced by society to be more closely associated with men than with women. Many traits associated with successful leadership, such as assertiveness, confidence, emotional stability, ambition and competitiveness, were seen as traits possessed by men, and not by women (Kiser 599). Women were generally put into the role of follower or passivist, and especially black women were associated with notions such as “female-headedness, illegitimacy, teen pregnancy, poverty, and welfarism” (Barnett 164), which made them unfit for leadership in the eyes of society. When looking more closely at leadership, however, and by breaking away from these traditional notions about leadership, one can find that black women were important leaders in their own right, just in a different way than men, as women were more limited in what they could and could not do in Civil Rights Organizations in the 1960s.

When looking at leadership purely based on who held recognized title positions in the SNCC, black women are basically non-existent, because for women “titled positions ... often translated into less power” (Robnett 1675). Women were seen as unsuited for a title position if it came with much power, meaning that if women were awarded title positions, this immediately limited them in their work. Knowing that getting a title for women had the opposite effect regarding power of what it had on men, many black women chose to participate behind the scenes in the organization, preventing them from becoming limited to clerical work (Robnett 1675). Women were generally not allowed to move up in ranks of the SNCC, and even if women were present at important staff or board meetings, they were often left out of the final decision-making process. Women were furthermore always asked for cleaning and secretarial duties (Urban 187-188; Robnett 1670-1671). The sexism in SNCC becomes obvious in a statement of activist Septima Clarke, as her position in the staff of the

SNCC was continuously questioned by men because she was female: “But those men didn't have any faith in women, none whatsoever. They just thought that women were sex symbols and had no contribution to make” (Robnett 1670-1671). That black men felt that women should stay out of important positions, is echoed by none other than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who wrote in *Echo in My Soul*, that even though women were capable of leadership, they should remain in their roles of supporting husband and children, as that was the natural order of things (Robnett 1672).

Not all black women within the SNCC, however, experienced the organization to be limited or sexist. Many women felt that being member of the SNCC was liberating instead of restricting, as the organization gave women more freedom in the public sphere than they had ever had before. Many black women therefore did not perceive the SNCC to be sexist, or simply chose to ignore the sexism to be able to focus on what was perceived as the most important fight at that moment: the fight for racial equality (Urban 188; Robnett 1676). In the words of SNCC activist Bernice Reagon: “my whole world was expanded in terms of what I could do as a person” (Robnett 1676). That sexism in the SNCC was seen as a controversial issue, can be seen in a paper called “Women in the Movement”, which was anonymously written by members of the SNCC, and outlined the sexist and discriminating practices going on in the organization at the time. The paper complained about the lack of important jobs for women despite their experience, and outlined that many women were unhappy with the work they did because they were not free to make decisions on their own, and were deemed inferior to the male members (Urban 188). As soon as it was discovered that the paper had been written by white female members Mary King and Casey Hayden, however, the paper was dismissed, as men did not take anything written by women seriously, and did not feel sexism to be a problem in the organization, thereby actually proving the sexist tendencies of the SNCC (Urban 187). Others say that the existence of the paper actually proved the SNCC to not be sexist or limited for women, as women could have only written such an article after working in a nonsexist organization, making them realize their own potential as activists (Morgan et al. 85).

Whether or not members of the SNCC thought sexism to be a big problem in the organization, it turns out women were able to work around their limitations to become the backbone of the organization. I believe a quote from Robnett to adequately summarize the role of women in the SNCC: “The fact that women's participation options as titled staff members were limited does not reduce the importance of their activities” (1676). Excluded in



formal leadership, many women developed to be bridge leaders, connecting the larger national movement with the desires of smaller rural communities, and changing what it means to be a leader (Robnett 1977). Women were furthermore capable office managers, and worked hard behind the scenes (Robnett 1973). In the next chapters I aim to show that black female members Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer and Diane Nash were all important as bridge leaders, office managers, and worked behind the scenes in unofficial leadership positions, on different levels of the SNCC.

## Chapter 2

### **Ella Baker: Founder & Mentor on a National Level**

Ella Baker is one of the few well-recognized black female activists of the Civil Rights Movement. Dedicating her life to the fight for racial equality, Ella Baker “was associated with whatever organization in the Black community was on the cutting edge of the era” (Payne 885). Having worked for both the NAACP and SCLC, Baker was a seasoned activist when she helped found and direct the SNCC (Payne 885). The focus in this chapter will specifically lie on Ella Baker as a female activist. After shortly sketching her early life, civil rights career and her general role in the SNCC, this chapter will focus on how class and gender perceptions influenced Ella Baker’s work as an activist. Considering the scrutinizing social control that came with being a woman in a more public sphere, I will not only look at how others saw Baker, but also how she saw herself. By touching upon concepts such as class, the culture of dissemblance, the question of sexism in the SNCC, feminism, and how consciously or unconsciously Baker dealt with these notions as a female activist, I aim to discover how Ella Baker managed to become a national vital force in the SNCC in a leadership position.

Born in 1903 in Norfolk, Virginia, Ella Josephine Baker was born into a black, middle-class family of three children. Although the Baker family did not have much money, Georgiana and Blake Baker highly valued education. Baker graduated at Shaw University at the top of her class, and soon began working for the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) (L. E. Williams 165-166). This organization’s values of community-outreach and helping one another, had much in common with Baker’s upbringing, as Baker’s mother was an active religious member who ran a charity, helping “neighbors and strangers alike that knocked at the door” (L. E. Williams 164). Baker was furthermore close to her grandmother, a former slave who told her stories about slave revolts and whipping punishments (Payne 886). That Baker was influenced by her family’s stories and values can be seen by more closely inspecting her career. After working at the YWCA, Baker started working for the Young Negroes Cooperative League, helping black neighborhoods and increasing African American’s purchasing power awareness. She furthermore cooperated with organizations such as the Women’s Day Workers and the Industrial League, which focused on helping black domestic workers. In 1941, Baker started working for the NAACP as assistant field secretary, marking Baker’s entrance into the big league of Civil Rights Organizations. In the NAACP Baker raised “funds, membership and consciousness” (Payne 888) in the South, convincing

people to join local chapters of the organization. After working at the NAACP in different positions throughout the years, she left the organization and started working for the SCLC in 1957, until she helped found the SNCC in 1960 (Payne 887-890).

Now that Ella Baker's early life and civil rights career have been sketched, it is time to look at Baker's personal ideas about activism, and how they influenced the way she worked in the SNCC. While working with both the NAACP and the SCLC, Ella Baker formed a critical idea of what effective activism and campaigning was. When working on the national level of the NAACP as National Director of Branches, for instance, Baker expressed her dissatisfaction about the way the NAACP was organized, calling the organization "stale and uninteresting" (qtd. In Payne 888). Baker moreover thought the NAACP to be too New York and middle-class centered, not aggressive enough, too focused on membership numbers and too interested in what white people thought of the organization (Payne 888). In the SCLC, Baker moreover disagreed with the way the organization was led primarily by male ministers, who held too much power in her opinion. Quickly seeing that, as a black woman, she would never hold a leadership position of much power, Baker left and later founded the SNCC (Robnett 1671).

As a co-founder of the SNCC, Baker was able to create the SNCC to fit her ideas of a successful Civil Rights Organization. Baker's influence can be found in the structure of the SNCC, which, as mentioned before, is non-hierarchical, grassroots-based and group centered. Ella Baker encouraged this participatory democracy within the SNCC as she "believed profoundly that there [was] leadership in everyone" (Morgan et al. 9). Next to being important because of her role as co-founder of the SNCC, Ella Baker was also a vital influence on many SNCC members, as she primarily functioned as an older mentor, believing that by connecting motivated students, she could make their voices heard (Carey 27; Morgan et al. 88). An inspiration for many activists, Baker was often referred to as "Mama Baker" as Grant writes, which clearly shows that members of the SNCC saw Ella Baker as a mentor figure in the organization (qtd. in Elliott 593). Baker's strength as a mentor was strongly tied to her style of activism, which is described as unique by many former SNCC members. This unique presence is where Baker's power as a female activist and mentor lies, as she re-shaped the way a non-formal leader could serve to be vital in the SNCC. "Baker situated herself in the dining room debates of the men and kitchen conversations of the women" (Bransby 257), but no matter in what company she was, Baker always walked in as if she belonged, and it was this dignified self-respect that commanded people's attention and respect (Bransby 256-257).

Baker took on this role of a mentor, because she thought that black students, with their youthful dynamism and progressive spirit, were the biggest hope for a democratic mass movement (Bransby 244). It was also primarily due to Ella Baker that the SNCC remained to be a student organization, independent from the NAACP or the SCLC. As James Forman states: “Baker “smashed” King’s plans to dominate the student movement” (Morgan et al. 9).

Having established both Baker’s intentions for the SNCC and her role in this organization, I am now going to look at the social control that influenced Ella Baker’s life and work. The first thing that I noticed when researching this was that, remarkably, there seems to be no documentation of Ella Baker’s personal life, or on how she dealt specifically with her responsibilities being both female and an activist. The only information available about Ella Baker is that what has already been written down in previous paragraphs: information about her childhood and career as an activist. This is not to say that there are no accounts of Ella Baker’s personal life at all, but when even sources named “Ella Baker and Models of Social Change” or “Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement “ do not even mention if she had a husband, children, or what she did in her free time, is peculiar. An explanation for this strange absence of information about Baker’s later personal life is that she practiced the previously mentioned culture of dissemblance. This would explain why there is much information about her personal life when she was a child, but almost nothing when she became older and co-founder of the SNCC, as the culture of dissemblance would prevent Baker from speaking about her marriage or personal life to protect herself and her womanhood. As a black woman in a public, male-dominated sphere, Baker was more vulnerable than most women, and therefore it seems likely she adapted herself to this culture of secrecy, not only to protect herself, but also to be seen as an individual activist, not defined by family or marriage.

As can be derived from Baker’s adaption to the culture of dissemblance, gender perceptions and social control heavily influenced her life, and so did the notion of class. How gender and class interacted together to form certain perceptions and expectations for Baker, will be explained in this next paragraph. Baker’s family was seen as one from a higher status, as Baker’s grandparents were able to acquire land when slavery was abolished. Not stuck in the exploitive sharecropping system many African Americans fell victim to, the Baker family became part of a self-sufficient, independent black farming community, which was successful enough to lessen the strain of economic hardships in the following years (Gilkes 150; L. E. Williams 166-167; Dingemans 41). Being a black, middle-class woman with a background in

higher education, Baker was expected to become a teacher, “since that was just what a Black woman with a degree was expected to do” (Payne 887). Due to patriarchy and sexism, middle-class black women were expected to work with children, in the household or for church organizations, and not as activists, as “protesting and getting arrested were simply not “ladylike”” (Bransby 256). Furthermore, the black middle-class was under much scrutiny from white mainstream society, who resented them for having escaped poverty, and therefore black women were under much pressure to adhere to their traditional social roles (Scott 11). Limited to certain jobs, working in the civil rights branch was hard, as “this meant that all the civil rights activities, such as networking, building cooperatives, maintaining social contacts, and the registration of voters, had to take place within these confines” (Dingemans 41). Working in a Civil Rights Organization while being a teacher was furthermore dangerous, as black women often got fired from teaching positions when employers found out about civil rights membership or activities, even though the women’s male counterparts did not experience this problem at all (Barnett 173-174). Georgiana Baker, described as an independent but traditional women, also saw teaching as the right job for her daughter Ella. Ironically, Ella Baker never claimed teaching as her real profession, even though many of the functions she held in Civil Rights Organizations over the years, required her to teach others. As a result, many young women such as Diane Nash, admired Ella Baker for taking on the non-traditional role of activist, and the way in which Baker was able to construct an alternative model for womanhood through her activism, by “maintaining a dignified public self-presentation” (Bransby 258), but also being an influential and powerful female activist (L. E. Williams 167; 177; Dingemans 42; Payne 886; Bransby 265).

With little information about her personal life, but keeping in mind the culture of dissemblance and the fact that Baker did not adhere to traditional gender roles, it does seem that Ella Baker was aware that social control limited how she could work as an activist. As mentioned before, she left the SCLC as she realized she would never hold a position with much influence because she was neither a man, nor a minister. She knew the ministers would never allow her to rise in ranks, as they had actually hired her as associate director on a temporary basis while searching for a more suitable candidate, “since the ministers did not feel that a woman was a suitable director for their organization” (Robnett 1671). Although called “indispensable” and a “hero”, Ella Baker furthermore never received equal pay for her work in the SCLC, and was expected to work longer hours than her male counterparts (Elliot 579; Barnett 176). This blatant sexism in many areas of the Civil Rights Movement motivated

Ella Baker to found the SNCC. As explained in the first chapter, the SNCC was also sexist in certain ways, but Baker herself is proof that the SNCC at least allowed women to have much influence behind the scenes, even when not awarded with leadership titles. That there was more room for women to work in higher positions off the record, can be seen as a consequence of Baker's own influence as co-founder of the SNCC, as she had much influence as a mentor but could hardly be expected to be able to eradicate all of the sexism present in a Civil Rights Organization such as the SNCC in the 1960s. As a founder and mentor of the SNCC, Ella Baker was still never recognized as a movement leader in the black community when she was alive (Barnett 175), even though she was an experienced activist. Ella Baker, although frustrated with the limitations laid upon her and her work, thought the goal of racial equality to be the most important battle. As she once said, she was solely interested in the development of good leadership to make the Civil Rights Movement more successful:

“You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up the pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization would come ... I was only interested in seeing that a leadership had the chance to develop” (qtd. in Barnett 176).

That the SNCC for women can be seen as one of the most progressive Civil Rights Organizations in that time, is also because of its un-religious nature. In general, the Civil Rights Movement can be seen as a “church-based movement” (Elliot 597), especially in religious-based organizations such as the SCLC. The SNCC not only consisted of young, and therefore generally more progressive members, but was also not strongly tied to a religion, thanks to Ella Baker and her experience in the SCLC (Elliot 598). By keeping the black church separate from the SNCC, religion's more traditional and sexist notions did not influence the organization.

When talking about social concepts such as gender, class and sexism, the theory of feminism is important not to overlook. This theory, which revolves around advancing women's rights on the grounds of gender equality, was paradoxical for black women, as mainstream feminism overlooked the problem of race that black women dealt with, which often led women activist to tackle racial issues first (Nain 1-3). This is exactly what Baker did, as she prioritized the fight for racial rights over that of gender equality. Ella Baker can, however, be called a feminist as she believed she herself could contribute significantly to the Civil Rights Movement, and therefore believed women to be valuable in the public sphere.

Having more women than men active in the movement, Blumberg writes, made it "possible and even necessary for women to act in ways usually closed to them, to take the initiative, or to manipulate their traditional gender definitions" (qtd. in Barnett 177), which again, was what Baker did. In the SNCC, Baker was able to work around the limitations set for her as a female: she, for instance, did all the work a director of the SNCC would do, but without having the actual title (L. E. Williams 169). This enabled her to have much influence and to do much work, without being perceived as a threat to male members.

Ella Baker's way of speaking and work method is furthermore often labeled as being "feminist" by theorists. Melina Abdullah states Baker to be an example of the "black feminist leadership style", in which Baker functions as a bridge leader. Baker also used the tactics familiar to feminist movements: initiate action, learn from this, change tactics and try again (qtd. in Miller 163). That she was a woman moreover helped Ella Baker in the way she mentored the SNCC. Instead of being overly assertive or competitive, Baker was primarily good at listening to what people actually wanted to achieve. The abilities to listen and to be patient, are skills Baker picked up after often being interrupted and talked over in SCLC meetings, where ministers expected Baker to be less vocal in meetings because of her gender. Baker's success can also be attributed to her excellent leadership skills in general. She knew much about Civil Rights Organizations, its members and how to motivate and connect people. Baker was also excellent at mobilizing and organizing as "researchers of social movements have credited Baker with developing the fine distinction between mobilizing and organizing" (L. E. Williams 172). Seeing the SNCC as her true calling, Ella Baker knew what she wanted to achieve, and knew how to work around sexist limitations.

In the end, Ella Baker can be labeled a highly influential activist in both the larger Civil Rights Movement and the SNCC. With a long history in civil rights, inspired by her upbringing, Baker became a national civil rights force as the co-founder of the SNCC, and became a mentor to its members. From a middle-class background, but with a commanding presence, Ella Baker defied gender expectations, by becoming a prominent activist as a black woman and by creating a new model of womanhood for female activists. Aware of the social control that influenced her life as a black woman, Baker adhered to the culture of dissemblance to protect herself, and furthermore both dealt with sexism and worked around it consciously to create a successful organization. Ella Baker moreover believed in gender equality, but prioritized the civil rights fight, which does not withhold theorists from calling her and her leadership style feminist. Thanks to her strong beliefs and experience, Baker not

only inspired many, but was able to create a youth organization that was non-religious, and which offered black women more opportunities for informal leadership.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Fannie Lou Hamer: A Local Force & Public Speaker in Mississippi**

“Her speeches had themes. They had lessons. They had principles. And then when you had heard all that said with such extraordinary brilliance-like wow, that's what it is” (qtd. in Hamlet 566-567). This quote, by Eleanor Homes Norton, is one of the many riveting statements about Fannie Lou Hamer and her public speaking talent. As a black woman, Fannie Lou Hamer was uncommonly unafraid to step into the spotlight, and say what she thought needed to be said about racism in society. Uneducated and entering the civil rights scene at a somewhat later age (White 22), Fannie Lou Hamer can be seen as having taken a somewhat unorthodox path to becoming a black female civil rights and community leader. In this chapter, I am going to take a look at this extraordinary activist, and how she shaped her activism in a time where women were heavily influenced by social control. I will start by sketching a framework of Hamer’s early life and career. By looking at the influence that gender, class, social control and the harassment that came with activism on a local level had on her and her work, and at Hamer’s own beliefs and perceptions of these notions, I aim to uncover how Fannie Lou Hamer became a local force in the SNCC.

Fannie Lou Hamer was born on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917 near Montgomery County, the youngest of no less than 20 children. Her parents, Ella and Jim Townsend, soon moved to the Mississippi Delta, to start working on the land for a living. The Townsend family got stuck in the system of sharecropping, a system that systematically exploited black families working on the land, as goods and services were overpriced and owned by the plantation owner the family borrowed the land from. Hamer’s family was soon indebted and unable to get any sense of economic independency. As a result, Hamer herself was already picking cotton in the fields at the age of six, and stopped attending school at the age of 13 to work on the Marlowe Plantation full-time (L. E. Williams 145; White 22). By personally experiencing the struggle of surviving in a suppressive sharecropping system, “Hamer came to realize at an early age that something was wrong in Mississippi” (Hamlet 563).

In 1944, Fannie married Perry Hamer, and continued to work on the plantation for another 18 years, until 1962, when Fannie attended her first civil rights gathering. At this

rally, sponsored by the SNCC, Fannie was one of the first people to volunteer to try and register to vote, which had been a problem for African Americans in that region for a longer period of time, as the state used tactics such as literacy exams to disqualify blacks to vote (Hamlet 563; White 22). Already 45 years old and a mother (Dingemans 53), Fannie was fired for participating in civil rights activities, although she later stated it was the best thing that could have happened to her: “They kicked me off the plantation, they set me free. It’s the best thing that could happen. Now I can work for my people” (qtd. in White 22). Only passing the literacy test in 1963 after multiple attempts, Fannie Lou Hamer remained involved in civil rights activities. Hamer was raised religiously, and believed in equality for all, and that white people could be saved through activism as well. Frustrated and angry about the dire circumstances she, her family, and many other African Americans were forced to live in, she exclaimed that she became an activist because she was “sick and tired of being sick and tired” (qtd. in Gyant 638; Brooks 534; Irons 692). As an activist, Fannie Lou Hamer was involved in many different initiatives, including voter registrations, welfare programs and circulating petitions for the needy. She is best known for helping coordinate the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, which was an initiative from the SNCC to get black people to register to vote in the state of Mississippi (White 23). She furthermore became a founding member of the interracial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in that same year (L. E. Williams x; Hamlet 570; Dingemans 54).

Fannie Lou Hamer worked on different levels of the Civil Rights Movement, with a focus on local work. An example of this is her Freedom Farm Cooperative in Ruleville, Mississippi, which focused on getting poor blacks plots of land to create successful independent farms (White 21). Hamer is a good example of what Robnett calls a bridge leader: someone who functions as a bridge, connecting bigger national Civil Rights Organizations to smaller local communities that they serve (1685; Dingemans 54). Fannie Lou Hamer was indeed connected to the national struggle for civil rights, as she worked as field secretary for the SNCC. Simultaneously, however, she was involved in her own community in Mississippi, focusing on grassroots level of activism and connecting the needs of the locals to the policies and initiatives of the SNCC (Hamlet 565). Hamer’s leadership and activist style can furthermore be described as “servant leadership”, which Greenleaf describes as a leader that “is committed to serving others through a cause, a crusade, a movement, a campaign with humanitarian, not materialistic, goals” (qtd. in L. E. Williams 143). A servant leader is someone who is present at the lowest level of activism, “in the trenches” as one

might say, where close bonds between leaders and followers are created and where a problem can be looked at from different perspectives. That Hamer became a servant and bridge leader, can be attributed to the fact that as a woman, she was not able to become a formal leader in the movement. Being both a bridge and a servant leader, Hamer was under constant threat of violence, as the risk of getting hurt is greatest at the local level compared to, for instance, doing a secretary job at the national SNCC office (L. E. Williams 143).

Having explained where Hamer comes from, how she came into contact with the Civil Rights Movement and what might have motivated her to take action against racial discrimination in the South, I am now going to go into specifics about how Hamer's gender and class influenced her life as a female activist. Unlike someone like Ella Baker, who went after leadership on a higher national level, Fannie Lou Hamer was not as scrutinized or limited in her activism: working on a lower level, not going after an official leadership position in the SNCC, and also an uneducated sharecropper deemed one of the lowest classes in society, it seems logical to state that Fannie Lou Hamer was not perceived as a threat to black men or gender roles in the Civil Rights Movement. Hamer herself, however, did have a clear vision of gender roles and activism, as she was a strong believer of leadership coming from commitment and hard work, not from one's gender. A highly religious person, Hamer's ideas about women's issues such as abortion, out-of-wedlock births and contraception, can be labeled as conservative, and do not match the contemporary vision of a feminist, as Hamer found these things "equaled genocide and sin" (Lee 172). She did prioritize the fight for racial equality over the fight for gender equality, as she addressed other women in speeches by saying that their goal was "Not to fight to liberate ourselves from the men - this is another trick to get us fighting among ourselves - but to work together with black men" (qtd. in Hamlet 569). Hamer was also not afraid to publicly criticize leading men, and how some of them lacked the courage to lead in communities like she did, wanting them to face the dangers of local activism as well: "You see the thing what so pitiful about it, the men been wanting to be the boss all these years, and the ones not up under the house is under the bed" (qtd. in Hamlet 569).

That Fannie Lou Hamer was less controlled in her activist work specifically, however, does not mean she had it easier than black women working on more national levels of the SNCC. As mentioned before, Hamer being on a local level in a Southern state like Mississippi, meant her being a more vulnerable and direct target for white harassment and violence. Mississippi has a long track record regarding cruelty and violence against African

Americans. Next to the South's suppressive Jim Crow system, segregation and other discriminating practices, L. E. Williams writes that "death threats, destruction of property, night rider attacks, fire bombings and, of course, lynching" (147), were all routine forms of violence used abundantly in Mississippi during and before the time of the Civil Rights Movement. The Hamer family was no stranger to these horrible hate crimes. Both Hamer's husband and daughter lost their jobs and were arrested, she herself got a \$9000 water bill for a house that did not even have running water, and she has furthermore been shot at multiple times throughout her career (Hamlet 564). Dorothy Hamer, Fannie's daughter, furthermore died of a hemorrhage because the local hospitals refused to treat black civilians, forcing the Hamer's to drive more than 100 miles to the nearest hospital that treated blacks (L. E. Williams 146).

There are two specific accounts regarding hate crimes directed at Fannie Lou Hamer that seem to stand out compared to the rest of the harassment she endured, as they are specifically related to Hamer being a woman and from a lower class. In 1961, Fannie Lou Hamer was operated to have a small uterine tumor removed, but came out of the operation a sterilized woman. Mississippi endorsed such inhumane acts, to limit the African American births in their state, as fear of black male sexuality had turned into an attempt to control black reproduction. After research, it turns out that the horrible act of sterilizing uneducated black women in the South without their consent was a common occurrence during that time (L. E. Williams 146; White 22). This inhumane act is an example of how white mainstream society tried to control black women from lower classes, who were not perceived as actual ladies, by taking away their reproductive authority, a practice that can be traced back to the times of slavery. So even though Hamer was less controlled in her work as activist, she was still very much under the control of white mainstream society.

In 1963, another incident occurred, in which Hamer and especially her womanhood were attacked. On her way back from a SNCC voting registration workshop in South Carolina, Hamer's bus was pulled over by white Mississippi police officers. Hamer and all fellow SNCC personnel were jailed for five days and severely beaten by both police officers and black male inmates, which left Hamer with a blot clot in her left eye and a permanent injured kidney (Hamlet 565; Irons 697). A personal account from Hamer herself, explains how she was also sexually harassed by a white patrol officer while being beaten, as he "pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back, back up" (qtd. in Hamlet 565). This again showed how certain tactics of harassment were specially focused to intimidate black women

working on the local level of activism. Contrary to many who might stop working as activists to protect themselves, it seems like violence and harassment only motivated Fannie Lou Hamer to fight even harder for equal rights. That she succeeded in becoming a vital force in the movement, can for a large part be attributed to this no compromise, persevering attitude, as she kept working as an activist even after enduring the acts of violence mentioned above (Hamlet 565; L. E. Williams 141). As head of her church congregation, Fannie Lou Hamer found much support in her faith, which can be labeled as the source of her determinacy and strength to continue her work (Irons 692; L. E. Williams 152).

As much of Fannie Lou Hamer's success and influence as an activist can be attributed to her flawless public speaking skills, I am going to elaborate how both gender and class influenced Hamer as a public speaker, as this is yet another aspect of activism that was heavily influenced by these two notions. Fannie Lou Hamer's rhetorical addresses have been labeled as highly influential, as she was able to inspire many with her simple words. Uneducated, and from a sharecropper's family, her rhetorical education and upbringing can be called vernacular. This, however, did not negatively influence the way Hamer got her message across. On the contrary, Hamer's humble background, combined with her confidence, understanding of race relations, and preacher-style of speaking, helped her get her message across to educated and uneducated people alike. Hamer was a master at crafting messages that were simple and coherent, incorporating African American culture with Christianity and even music, to connect people from different backgrounds (Brooks 518-519). As she once said: "But you see now baby, whether you have a Ph.D., DD, or no D, we're in this bag together" (qtd. in Hamlet 569). Hamer, however, rarely discussed women's issues within the movement. This is probably because she saw multiple limitations laid upon women, not to be limitations through her religion. In line with black feminism, she also first wanted to address the problem of race, as this was ignored by mainstream feminism and activism for gender equality. It was at a SNCC conference in Nashville that Fannie Lou Hamer showed off her rhetorical talents for the first time, which ultimately made her into a spokesperson and better-known leader for the civil rights struggle. With blatant honesty and improvisation, as she hardly ever prepared her speeches in advance (Hamlet 566), Hamer has been called unrivaled by anyone in the area of activist public speaking, except maybe for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Dingemans 55). As Mills writes: "Her unlettered voice gave her words a power that no amount of grammatical correctness could have infused" (qtd. in Hamlet 566). Hamer, however, has not received even half of the fame Dr. King has received for his

rhetorical greatness in the movement; being a black woman, Hamer's speeches were less frequently recorded and less well preserved (Brooks 512).

A historically significant moment in which Fannie Lou Hamer utilized her speaking skills was at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, which Hamer attended as member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. At this convention, she gave a rattling testimony about being beaten and sexual harassed in jail. That Hamer's statement was impressive, can be seen by the reaction of none other than the President of the United States, as President Johnson taped an unprepared press conference over the story, in a panic to divert America's attention from Hamer's testimony, which questioned the morals of the land he was leading. Hamer's testimony, however, was replayed several times over throughout the convention afterwards. This testimony, that is said to have "left most Credentials Committee members in tears" (Brooks 515), turned the tide for the civil rights struggle as it forced Johnson to start negotiating with organizations, ultimately contributing to the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (Brooks 515; White 23).

In the end, it can be said that Fannie Lou Hamer was an extraordinary activist. Through her simple upbringing, Hamer got into contact with inequality and suppressive racist systems from an early age on. When finally entering the civil rights arena at a later age, she used her faith as a source of power to persevere through acts of violence and harassment, such as her involuntary sterilization and being beaten in jail. She became the backbone of the local Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, thus empowering many black communities in one of the poorest and most racist states of the United States. Hamer strongly believed that activism came from hard work and commitment, and was untied to social constructs such as gender, but had conservative ideas about many women's issues, because of her religion. Being a widely known and skilled spokesperson, Fannie Lou Hamer was able to connect to people from different races, genders and backgrounds, as her honesty, simple messages and strong delivery, inspired her listeners and followers. As someone who just blatantly told everyone what she thought was important to tell, the culture of dissemblance did not seem to limit Hamer in her work at all, even though other factors such as hate crimes, aimed at her gender and her lower-class background, did disadvantage her in her activism. Hamer was not initially perceived as a threat to black men or gender roles, but proved herself to be a powerful activist, challenging the racial and gender status quo alike. That the President of the United States felt the need to tape something improvised over Hamer's testimony, shows the power of Hamer as an activist and her ability to tell honest stories in a compelling way.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Diane Nash: All-Round Teacher in the SNCC**

Diane Nash can be labeled a key figure in both the SNCC and the larger Civil Rights Movement as she was involved in many civil rights activities, and because she dedicated her life to educating youngsters on nonviolent civil rights tactics (J. Williams; Levy 237). Diane Nash, like Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, broke out of the traditional gender roles for women in the 1960s, to contribute to the fight for racial equality. Lighter skinned and younger than the two previously mentioned activists, and having deployed her skills on both the local and national level, this chapter is going to look at how Diane Nash was influenced by social control on both levels of activism, and how she shaped her own activism to become a vital female force in the SNCC. I aim to do this by first shortly sketching Nash's childhood and career path, like I have done in the previous two chapters. After that, I will use my sub questions about how gender, class, personal views, and motherhood framed Diane Nash's life, and her work as a black female activist.

Diane Nash was born in 1938 in Chicago, Illinois, in a Catholic family. Her parents, Dorothy and Leon Nash, had both migrated North for a better life. Nash's father held a clerical job, and her mother worked in a factory, providing the family with enough money to send their daughter to private elementary school, high school, and to university. Raised primarily by her religious grandmother, as her parents were often away from home and later divorced, Diane Nash was empowered with a strong catholic belief from an early age on (Glisson 200; Levy 235). Nash's grandmother, moreover, had been active in "racial uplift" campaigns when Nash was a child, and taught notions of this campaign, such as that black women were vital forces in black communities and that black inferiority was an untrue concept, to her granddaughter (Glisson 200).

Growing up in a Northern, Midwest State had a profound effect on Nash and her ideas about race relations. Even though racism was present in Chicago in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nash never experienced the more extreme and often violent forms of racism that were common in the South of the United States at that time (L. E. Williams 177). As she stated in an interview: "Because I grew up in Chicago, I didn't have an emotional relationship with segregation. I understood the facts and stories, but there was no emotional relationship" (qtd. in J. Williams). Shielded from the more severe Jim Crow laws while growing up, Nash realized

how severe racism and segregation were in the South, when going on a date at the Tennessee State Fair as a teenager, which can be seen as the one incident that changed how she felt about racism and segregation. Seeing the signs “colored” and “white” and realizing she was limited in which public accommodations she could use, struck a nerve with Nash: “I really resented that. I was outraged” (qtd. in J. Williams; Levy 235). The initial shock and humiliation Nash felt during this experience, soon developed into frustration and determination to change the racial status quo in the South (J. Williams; L. E. Williams 177; Glisson 201), even though Nash herself was sometimes deemed light enough to “pass” for a white person (Olson 152).

Due to this shocking experience as a teenager, Diane Nash became involved in the student branch of the Civil Rights Movement at a young age (L. E. Williams 177). Nash started living in the South, and personally experienced this discrimination as she transferred from Howard University to Fisk University in Nashville, in 1959. There, she started attending workshops by Reverend Lawson from the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), who preached about the nonviolent approach of resisting Jim Crow laws. Skeptic about his approach at first, it was in 1959 that Nash tested this nonviolent approach by participating in sit-ins at lunch counters in Nashville. Sit-ins were a way of nonviolent protest, in which black people occupied a seat at a lunch counter that was designated for whites only (Glisson 201; Levy 236). Dressed neatly and composed, the participants would politely ask to be served while occupying a seat. Terrified to death, but determined to participate, Nash eventually became a leader on the local level of activism by becoming the leader of this Nashville movement (L. E. Williams 177; Olson 156).

Eventually, the larger sit-in movement from multiple cities came together in North Carolina in 1960, and developed into a national sit-in campaign (Levy 236; Glisson 205). It was also at this time that Nash became active in the recently founded SNCC (Levy 236), in which she developed her native talents for activism and “[became] one of the few women who rose to national prominence in SNCC” (L. E. Williams 178). Throughout her civil rights career, Nash was active in many different positions within the movement. Next to being elected leader of the Nashville sit-in campaign, she became the first field representative of the SNCC (Glisson 158), at one point almost solely coordinated the Freedom Rides (Olson 182), taught nonviolent tactics to many communities, and even went to jail for this (Zinn 79-80).

Having sketched a framework of Nash’s childhood, her initial motivation to get involved in civil rights, and her career, I am now going to look at gender and how this concept influenced Diane Nash’s work as a female activist. As stated before, sexism in the SNCC was



less strong than in other organizations at the time, but still present. That sexism was present in the SNCC is something that Diane Nash herself also experienced. As acknowledged leader of the Nashville movement, and hired by both the SCLC and the SNCC after she left university, Nash was an experienced and active civil rights leader who got paid to work in Civil Rights Organizations. When it became time to choose the first SNCC chairman, however, it became blatantly obvious that there was one problem regarding Nash's activism. To quote civil rights leader John Lewis: "Diane was a devoted, beautiful leader, but she was the wrong sex" (Olson 160). Wanting black men to hold leadership positions, the vote for SNCC chairman was held when Nash was absent, which many later thought to have been done on purpose. Even though it had already been decided that the chosen chairman should be someone with leadership experience and from Nashville, not Nash, but male student Marion Barry Jr. was elected, even though he had not been that involved in the sit-in campaign to begin with. This proves, once again, that being male in that time was more important to hold leadership positions, than actually being qualified for that position (Olson 160). Nash, however, did not seem discouraged by this sexism, and continued to informally lead other civil rights events such as the Freedom Rides of 1961.

Another example in which Diane Nash and her work as an activist were influenced by gender perceptions and sexism, is during these Freedom Rides, which used the interstate bus to protest the segregation of public transportation. While Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were in contact about breaking off the Freedom Rides, fearing a violent turn of events as the riders continued riding buses into the more racist South, they never included Nash in the talks. Instead "they patronized her and pushed her aside" (Levy 236; Olson 188), not considering her part of the inner circle, even though it was Nash who was meeting up with the riders and making calls to try and set-up protection for them. It was also Nash who, frustrated by King leaving her out of the decision-making process, defied leading men like King and Kennedy who "dismissed Nash and her allies" (Olson 198), and made the call to continue the Freedom Rides, even though King publicly got the credit for these rides (Zinn 44-45; Olson 188-189; Levy 236). This shows that Nash developed herself to be a leader on the national level as well, and that she did have some power as an activist, as she was able to continue the rides with help from other activists. The most logical conclusion one can draw from this is that Nash had this power because even though she was a women, she also was a skillful activist, who devoted her life to empowering young African Americans and teaching them to stand up to racial injustice (Levy 237). As an activist, Diane Nash's "courage and

cool daring were legendary” (Olson 148) in the SNCC, and with this she earned much respect from other activists. That people within SNCC respected Nash is seen when at one point, Nash was ready to leave the SNCC due to disagreements within the organization, but later was appointed a more formal role as head of SNCC’s direct action wing. This shows how Nash climbed from local to national activism, and that the SNCC did appreciate Nash as an activist (Olson 198).

Sexism in the Civil Rights Movement and the influence it had on women like Diane Nash, however, is not just limited to actual events and history, but is also present in writing about black female activists. In contrary to the two previously researched black female SNCC activists, I found a large amount of mentions about Nash’s outer appearance and how beautiful she was, in multiple sources. In one source she is called “a tiny, slender, campus beauty queen” (Zinn 20), in another source, Nash is called “incredibly beautiful” (qtd. in Martin 107), and yet another source explains that it was Nash’s “delicate beauty that bedazzled many of the male participants” (Olson 148). Next to beauty being used as a relevant factor to Nash’s civil rights career, as for instance in Glissons’s article, which states that her participation in beauty pageants gave her more confidence to lead (201), focusing or mentioning the beauty of an activist is strange and distracts from more relevant qualities and skills a person might have used in the fight for equality. By focusing on these distracting, gendered constructs such as beauty and other narrative tropes, writers “subordinate Nash to the men around her” (Buchanan 74), which distorts Nash’s legacy and is a consequence of sexism.

Having looked at the influence of gender perceptions on Nash’s work, and at the influence of sexism on writing about Nash’s life, it is important to now look at how Diane Nash herself looked at sexism and if she found herself limited in her work as a female activist. As mentioned before, the SNCC thought it important to showcase black male competence in society, and therefore followed society’s gender norms, by letting men take formal leading positions. Even though Nash herself can be called a leader in the SNCC, she was intensely uncomfortable with any form of public recognition, also because it made her an easier target for racist attacks. Being aware of the fact that in that time, men were seen as more competent to take leadership positions, Nash did not mind giving black men the stage in the fight for civil rights: “The thing that we didn’t do was take out-front positions, and when the TV cameras were around, I know I, for one, and I think many other women, were content to let the men who were interested in dealing with the press be with the press” (qtd. in Olson 161).

Nash was mainly concerned with empowering young people to fight the racial injustice through nonviolence (Levy 237; Olson 160-161), and prioritized the fight for equal rights for black people over the fight for equality between genders. Noticeably, Nash does state that her ideas about gender changed after the Civil Rights Movement, when the Women's Movement started to gain prominence. Reflecting on how King and Kennedy treated her during the Freedom Rides, "she said decades later that she never would have put up with such treatment if it had occurred after her exposure to the Women's Movement" (Olson 188), showing that after her civil rights years, she adopted more feminist notions about gender. That Nash became more critical of gender roles after her civil rights period, also shows that some of her own gender perceptions stayed internalized during the movement, because as a woman, Nash was not in a position to publicly state her opinion about such sensitive subjects.

Next to how solely gender constrained Diane Nash in her work for the SNCC, class, combined with the notion of gender, also influenced Nash's life and work in distinct ways. This influence and the way Nash tried to conform to two different ideas about the middle-class, will be analyzed in this next paragraph. As a middle-class black girl, Diane Nash was raised to not get involved in public political spheres, and to act like a proper middle-class lady: "Nash was taught to turn a blind eye toward racial injustice and strive to be a polite and accepting girl" (Levy 235). Being a lighter skinned, middle-class black woman, the pressure to appear as respectable was high. Often resented for being the small elite of black people that was able to leave poverty behind, black middle-class women frequently "felt a desperate need to establish the elusive respectability that was supposed to bring acceptance from the dominant culture" (Scott 12). Simultaneously, however, black people looked upon the black middle-class to help change this racist dominant culture that left many African Americans poor (Scott 11-12). This struggle between conforming to society's ideas of a woman's respectability, and going against this society and its prescriptive ideas about both race and gender, is very evident in Nash's life as it had a profound influence on her. This is something I will elaborate in the next paragraph.

Described as a "proper, middle-class Midwest native" (Olson 211) from the 1950s, Nash was expected to continue the "racial uplift" campaign, that her grandmother had been involved with as well. This campaign can be seen as a mix between conforming to society's rules, and going against them, as it was aimed at bettering African American lives and going against racism, but through the gender notions that were deemed acceptable at the time. Being a good wife and mother, and subordinating one's own interest for those roles in the home

sphere, was what was expected of black women like Nash (Glisson 201). On the one hand, Nash can be seen as rebelling against these class and gender constrictions, as she did not stay at home, but went into the field of activism and became a movement leader. On the other hand, Nash's marriage to James Bevel did "effectively [end] her position of leadership in the movement" (Olson 211). Even though Nash can be called independent and progressive for that time, she still conformed to some gender prescriptions, accepting the notion that "a wife should defer to her husband" (Olson 211), even if that meant giving up her leadership position in the movement.

Not shortly after Nash marrying Bevel and taking up her expected place in society by being a good wife, Nash rebelled against gender restrictions by going to jail for two whole years in 1962, while being four months pregnant. Nash got charged with two years but served only a few months, for "contributing to the delinquency of minors", or in other words, teaching young adults in Mississippi the tactics of nonviolent protest. Nash is quoted in Zinn's source, figuratively calling America a jail: "Since my child will be a black child, born in Mississippi, whether I am in jail or not he will be born in prison" (80). By using her motherhood, she justified going to jail, as her protest will benefit the child in the long-term, making her a good mother, even when framed in a more unconventional way.

Buchanan, however, points out that sources such as Zinn's, focus solely on Nash being a black female and mother, rather than on her other beliefs and principles as an activist, which can be seen as much more relevant:

"This is apparent, for example, in Howard Zinn's epigraph, which presents a noble, idealistic mother bravely entering a racist stronghold in order to promote black children's freedom, a poignant and dramatic portrait that fails to mention the term jail-without-bail" (Buchanan 64).

Nash had always been a strong believer of going to jail instead of paying fines, as going to jail would serve a purpose of protest and would furthermore spare organizations from paying high fines. This can be seen as the main reason why Nash chose to go to jail rather than to pay bond. By framing this decision solely in terms of motherhood and femininity, Nash's organizational, strategical and policy contributions to the movement are ignored, and this diminishes her legacy as an activist.

In the end, it can be stated that Diane Nash played an important role in the SNCC and the larger Civil Rights Movement. Raised in the Midwest, it was the shock of the more racist Jim Crow laws in the South, that propelled her towards activism in her younger years.

Still in school, Diane Nash became the leader of the local Nashville sit-in movement and became known for her bravery. Working for the SNCC but also the SCLC, Nash stayed active in campaigning, even when black men either took positions she was more qualified for, or excluded her from decision-making processes, showing the sexist colors of the movement on a national level. Nash walked the line between conforming to gender roles and gaining respectability as an educated middle-class woman in the dominant culture through for instance her marriage, and defying both the racism and sexism that were inherent in this dominant culture by taking a leadership position in the SNCC, and going to jail while pregnant. Although her views about feminism and gender changed after the Civil Rights Movement through exposure of the Women's Movement, Nash did not mind black men dominating the public sphere. That writers today still have trouble writing about women such as Nash in an unbiased way, is evident in the many irrelevant remarks about Nash's beauty which are present in many sources, and also in the way her decision to go to jail is often framed only in the light of motherhood. In the end, it can be said that the intersecting notions of gender, class, and motherhood, influenced Nash's work as an activist immensely, but that through her power of teaching, determination, and a strong belief in the civil rights cause, she was able to actively make a difference on both the local and the national level of the movement.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, I can conclude that black women in leadership positions in the SNCC between 1960 and 1964 on different levels of the organization, were influenced by social control a great deal, but that every woman was able to shape her activism in her own, personal way. Having established SNCC's goals, how the organization was more progressive and different from other Civil Rights Organizations, and how its internal structure worked in chapter one, I can state that there was less sexism present in the SNCC compared to other organizations. Social control, however, still influenced black female SNCC activists excessively, and expressed itself in limitations set on black female activism, always through perceptions of gender and class. Instead of fighting for formal leadership positions within SNCC that were solely deemed as suitable for black men, black women worked around these limitations by becoming informal bridge leaders, mentors, and field leaders. This new and informal activism not only changed the meaning of leadership, but also created a new model of womanhood within the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

My case studies of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer and Diane Nash are three examples of how black women on different levels of SNCC's activism, formed their own civil rights work. Social control and gender limitations turned out to differ per level. Ella Baker, working on a national level, was exceedingly confined in what she could and could not do as a black woman. In her civil rights career she was not allowed to rise in ranks, did not receive equal pay, and was never recognized as a movement leader in her lifetime, even though she functioned as an important mentor within one of the movement's most prominent organizations. Social control in Baker's life is especially evident in her adoption to the culture of dissemblance. That she found it necessary to cloud her personal life in a veil of secrecy to be taken seriously as an activist, shows how scrutinizing the social control at that time was, as especially Baker's middle-class status made society expect her to stay at home or work as a teacher. For Fannie Lou Hamer, the limitations she experienced as a female activist were different. On the local level, Hamer had less resistance as a leader, because she primarily worked behind the scenes and did not go after formal title positions like Baker did. Her low status as sharecropper made her seem less of a threat to male leadership, but also labeled her as unimportant, causing her speeches to be sparsely recorded and leaving her public speaking talent unrecognized for a long time, even though she was a talented speaker and vital force for the SNCC in Mississippi. For Hamer specifically, challenges arose in the form of violence

and gender specific harassment, which attacked her womanhood and aimed to stop her activism. Diane Nash experienced sexism and gender limitations on both the local and the national level. As local leader of the Nashville sit-ins, she was excluded from the vote on a national leadership position in the SNCC, and furthermore got excluded in the decision-making process by Dr. King during the Freedom Rides of 1961. Having a middle-class background like Baker, Nash furthermore walked a precarious line between conforming to expected gender roles from society, as she sacrificed her informal leadership role in the SNCC for her marriage, and going against them which became evident in her decision to go to jail while being pregnant. Gender perceptions regarding black female activists in general, moreover became evident in the limited way certain academics wrote about Nash and her activism.

Having concluded that all three women on various levels of the SNCC were limited in different ways, I can also state that all three women consciously dealt with these limitations to create both successful activism, and a new model of womanhood. Ella Baker worked around her limitations in national and formal leadership by creating an organization that accepted informal leadership for women, by prioritizing group success above her own, and by doing the work that went with the title of SNCC director, but not adopting the actual title. These are examples of how Baker created a new model of womanhood: by carrying herself as a dignified lady like society prescribed, but also going against gendered prescriptions by being an influential activist on a high national level. Unfortunately, it is impossible to create a complete image of Baker's model of womanhood, as her culture of dissemblance hides much of her personal life and opinions, such as how important religion was to her, or what she thought about feminism or women's issues such as abortion and contraception. Fannie Lou Hamer had a more open disposition, and her model of womanhood and female activism shows a clearer balance between traditional views of womanhood, and newer, progressive gender perceptions. Through her religion, Hamer had conservative views about women's rights and issues, but it was also religion that motivated Hamer to stay active in a sphere that was traditionally dictated as only for men. This motivation is evident in the way Hamer continued activism, even after being harassed and hurt multiple times because of her work. Whether to label Hamer as feminist is difficult, as she did not believe in certain women's rights, and furthermore never publicly talked about women's issues within the movement in her speeches, although she did believe that successful activism had nothing to do with gender. Diane Nash can be seen as someone who, like Baker, actively worked around limitations set

for her, but like Hamer, created a more mixed model of womanhood, containing both traditional and new views regarding gender equality and gender roles in society. Nash was not afraid to defy leading men like King if she disagreed with them, and furthermore threatened to leave the SNCC when she disagreed with the organization. Nash, however, did not mind working behind the scenes, letting men dominate the public platform of the movement, and furthermore adhered to social control when she got married. Nash did clearly develop new ideas about womanhood herself, as she was able to frame her activism in the context of motherhood when going to jail, and also adapted more feminist notions later in life.

Eventually, these three women all prioritized the fight for racial equality over the fight for gender equality. This is in line with black feminism, but whether all three women consciously prioritized one fight over the other because of feminism is debatable, as none of the three women mentioned black feminism, and because they all had different ideas regarding women's rights, gender roles and womanhood. An extension of this thesis, therefore, could be research on the parallels between black female activism and the black feminism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Women's movement that followed the Civil Rights Movement. One could look at how black female activism, leadership roles and social control changed during the Women's Movement, as change in this is already evident in my analysis of Diane Nash, who clearly adopted more progressive and feminist notions after her civil rights career. Ultimately, there is still much to be discovered about black female activism and the legacy of black women in the larger civil rights narrative, and the struggle for equality that is still going on today. As Ella Baker states: "In order to see where we are going, we not only must remember where we have been, but we must understand where we have been" (qtd. in Moses and Cobb 3).



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