Women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements

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Summary

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are the names that come to mind for most Americans if asked about the civil rights or Black Power movements. Others may point to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, both of whom backed pathbreaking civil rights legislation. However, recent scholarship suggests that neither black male leaders nor white male presidents were always the most important figures in the modern struggle for black freedom. Presidents took their cues not simply from male luminaries in civil rights organizations. Rather, their legislative initiatives were largely in response to grassroots protests in which women, especially black women, were key participants. African American women played major roles in local and national organizing efforts and frequently were the majority in local chapters of groups as dissimilar as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Black Panther Party. Even familiar names like Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King have become little more than sanitized national icons, while their decades-long efforts to secure racial, economic, and gender justice remain relatively unknown. Aside from activists and scholars, even fewer of us know much, if anything, about the female allies of the black freedom struggle, including white southerners as well as other women of color. A closer look at the women who made enormous contributions to both the modern civil rights and Black Power movements sheds new light on these struggles, including the historic national victories we think we fully understand, such as the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In short, examining women’s participation in the “long civil rights movement,” which historians increasingly date to the New Deal and World War II, calls for a redefinition of more conventional notions of leadership, protest, and politics.

Keywords: civil rights movement, Black Power, women, gender
The modern civil rights and Black Power movements emerged out of a centuries-long tradition of African American resistance and self-determination. Both had a significant impact on nearly every facet of American life, from politics and the arts to education and foreign policy. Although few people aside from scholars and activists know their names, scores of women—especially African American women—participated on all levels of the modern black freedom movement: as leaders, grassroots activists, strategists, and theorists. They often constituted the majority of protesters and even outnumbered men in groups as diverse as branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Black Panther Party (BPP). As one scholar of the southern movement noted: “Women took civil rights workers into their homes of course ... but women also canvassed more than men, showed up more frequently at mass meetings and demonstrations and more frequently attempted to vote.” Another oft-quoted observation from a civil rights activist asserted, “It’s no secret that young people and women led organizationally.”

Often working in concert with black men and sometimes with white allies, African American women also drew on their own distinctive organizing traditions. From juke joints, beauty shops, and bridge clubs to sororities, professional organizations, and church groups—including the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), the National Beauty Culturists League, and the National Welfare Rights Organization, among others—black women used their dense associational networks, both formal and informal, in their quest for freedom. Black Power women also created their own organizations, including the Black Women’s United Front and the Third World Women’s Alliance, to press their demands for racial, economic, and gender justice within an anti-imperialist, global perspective. Despite their contributions, women too often remain unappreciated, unexamined, and hidden behind a largely male face that continues to dominate both scholarly and popular renderings of the African American freedom struggle. It is not just that women “were there too.” Nor is it that women were simply the “backbone” of these movements, working largely behind the scenes. Rather, women’s participation demands a redefinition and expansion of more conventional conceptions of leadership, protest, and politics. Examining women in the civil rights and Black Power movements sheds new light on how these struggles emerged, how they operated, and how they were sustained.

The Iconic Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King

With some important exceptions, biographies and memoirs of individual activists constitute the bulk of the scholarship on women’s participation in the black freedom movement. Many of these published accounts focus on little-known figures such as Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Anne Moody, Anne Braden, Dorothy Height, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown, to name but a few.

Biographers have also addressed the distorted perceptions of more recognizable women, like Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King. Reduced to one-dimensional, iconic figures, their activism and militancy often have been obscured in our collective national memory: Rosa Parks, the tired seamstress whose singular refusal to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus launched a movement, and Coretta Scott King, the dutiful wife and respectable widow who dedicated the remainder of her life to preserving her husband’s legacy, most
notably in a national Martin Luther King holiday. Others, like Daisy Bates, have been recognized largely in relation to more powerful men, such as Arkansas Governor Orville Faubus and President Dwight Eisenhower. Yet Parks, King, and Bates all had a long history of activism before and after attaining national visibility.

Usually defined almost exclusively by her single act of defiance on an Alabama bus, Rosa Parks was, in fact, a lifelong advocate for racial justice. She organized throughout Alabama and nationally against racial and sexual violence perpetrated upon southern blacks, prior to her role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Nor was Parks the first to challenge segregated seating on public transportation. African American women have a long history of such protests, dating at least to antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s lawsuit against a railroad company after she was forcibly ejected from the whites-only “ladies car” in the 1880s. In Montgomery, Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith were arrested in two separate bus incidents just months before Parks’s own historic confrontation for similarly violating the local segregation ordinance. Colvin and Smith’s arrests aroused the ire of the black community, but African American leaders felt the teenagers were not sufficiently “respectable” to rally behind. Nor was Parks the only woman responsible for the bus boycott. Jo Ann Robinson, president of the Women’s Political Council; Georgia Gilmore, cook and founder of the Club from Nowhere; and the thousands of domestic workers who stayed off the buses for over a year were just some of the African American women who made the boycott a success. Unable to find employment after the year-long protest, Rosa Parks relocated to Detroit, where she pressed for black freedom on both the local and national levels. After helping to elect Michigan Congressman John Conyers in 1964, she worked in his Detroit office until she retired in 1988. In the 1980s, she started the Raymond and Rosa Parks Institute for Self-Development to bring young people into the freedom movement. While she is linked almost exclusively with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Parks met and admired Malcolm X, and in 1996 she eulogized Robert Williams, the author of *Negroes with Guns*, which influenced the creation of the BPP. Far from the “meek,” “humble,” or “quiet” seamstress—the accolades officials intoned as she lay in state at the U.S. Capitol in 2005 (the first woman so honored)—Parks was a dedicated and militant activist whose lifetime of protest spanned more than sixty years.

Similarly, Coretta Scott King, singularly celebrated as the widow of the slain Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was far more politically engaged than is generally known. In fact, Coretta, not Martin, was the political activist when the two met in Boston in the 1950s. She was involved in the Progressive Party, the NAACP, and the peace movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s, all considered slightly subversive amidst the emergence of Cold War politics and anticommunism. And it was Coretta who inspired her husband’s global peacemaking. She opposed the war in Vietnam earlier and more publicly than he did, and she was a member of both Women Strike for Peace and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Following King’s assassination, Coretta joined the women’s movement and the anti-apartheid movement, even meeting with President Ronald Reagan to urge U.S. divestment in South Africa. She brought attention to black poverty and the HIV-AIDS crisis and worked to end discrimination against LGBT communities. Like Parks, Coretta Scott King claimed more than fifty years of human rights activism when she died in 2006.
The civil rights movement—which was much more than a demand for citizenship rights and legal equality—is still often bracketed by the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision on one end and either the 1965 Voting Rights Act or the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on the other. Yet even the national victories we think we fully understand take on new meaning when black women’s efforts are included: How many Americans know that women were the key petitioners in three of the five cases that made up the 1954 landmark *Brown* decision and that Constance Baker Motley was one of the three key litigators? Or that Amelia Boynton’s decades of local activism in Selma, Alabama, culminated in the historic march from Selma to Montgomery and the 1965 Voting Rights Act? As historians sharpened their focus, frequently allowing women’s participation to emerge more clearly, they have also broadened their perspective to encompass a “long civil rights movement.” Thus, despite the debate regarding the chronology of the freedom movement, scholars have increasingly located the roots of the modern civil rights movement in the New Deal and World War II.

Septima Clark, a schoolteacher in South Carolina, is another unsung heroine whose activism spanned multiple decades. Clark helped push Charleston to hire its first black teachers in its segregated schools in the 1920s. In the 1940s, she joined the campaign to equalize black and white teacher salaries. After she was fired by the school board for her membership in the NAACP, Clark was hired at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. There she developed Citizenship Schools, a radical approach to empowering impoverished southern blacks through literacy and voter-registration campaigns. The majority of Citizenship School teachers and students were women, including beauticians, sharecroppers, and other local activists. When Red-baiting forced Highlander to close its doors temporarily in 1961, the Citizenship Schools were transferred to Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). By 1971, Clark’s Citizenship Schools had trained over twenty-five thousand people and played a major role in registering black voters across the South.

Pauli Murray was another influential figure. Denied admission to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill in the 1930s because she was African American and at Harvard University because she was female, Murray was arrested for violating Virginia’s segregated bus seating and participated in a successful sit-in at a Washington, DC, lunch counter in the 1940s. Murray was befriended by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and she helped organize the all-black 1941 March on Washington Movement led by black labor leader A. Philip Randolph. Uniting a wide array of African American organizations, including the NCNW—an umbrella organization of nearly eight hundred thousand women that historian Will Jones called “the most notable backer of the March on Washington Movement”—Randolph threatened to bring fifty thousand demonstrators to Washington, DC, to protest racial discrimination in employment. In response, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order banning racial discrimination in the defense industry. As a law student at Howard University, Murray helped frame the argument for the *Brown* decision. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s Indian Independence Movement, she was a founding member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and she developed the legal argument to train activists in nonviolent civil disobedience to protest Jim Crow practices not only in the South but also in the federal government.
Both Murray and Anna Arnold Hedgeman, another long-time activist and one of the principal organizers of the historic 1963 March on Washington, protested the exclusion of black women from the event’s program. Two years later, Murray coined the term *Jane Crow* to draw attention to the sexism as well as the racial discrimination faced by African American women. Murray was also a board member of the American Civil Liberties Union and worked with its Committee on Discrimination Against Women for passage of a federal equal pay bill. She pioneered the use of the Fourteenth Amendment to argue for women’s rights and was instrumental in gaining support for the addition of sex discrimination to Title VII of the historic 1964 Civil Rights Act. Murray was a founding member of the National Organization for Women, and she became the first ordained black woman priest in the Episcopal Church. In 2015, the National Historic Preservation Trust named Murray’s childhood home in Durham, North Carolina, a National Treasure to commemorate her pioneering work in civil and women’s rights.

One of the most important black women activists was Ella Baker. Like her friend Pauli Murray, Baker was born in North Carolina and migrated to Harlem in the late 1920s. In the 1930s, Baker coauthored an exposé, “The Bronx Slave Market.” The piece underscored the triple stigmas of gender, race, and poverty that forced unemployed black women domestic workers during the Depression to sell their labor on street corners to the highest bidders. In 1940, the NAACP hired Baker to organize local branches throughout the South. Baker joined a coterie of stalwart NAACP women, such as Daisy Lampkin and Ruby Hurley. By the end of the war, Baker’s efforts helped the NAACP grow from 50,000 to over 450,000 members, with the largest expansion in the South. During her travels to the South, Baker helped to build and strengthen networks of African American organizers that would become crucial during the 1950s and 1960s black freedom struggle. For example, she ran a series of leadership training conferences in the 1940s that attracted local activists, including Rosa Parks.

Moving south again after the Montgomery Bus Boycott—which she had supported through In Friendship, a northern-based organization that she founded with fellow activist Bayard Rustin—Baker became executive secretary of King’s newly formed SCLC in 1957. SCLC was a coalition of southern black male ministers, but because Baker was neither a man nor a minister, her position was only temporary until a suitable male preacher could take the helm. When the sit-in movement erupted across the South in 1960, Baker brought together student demonstrators and persuaded them to form their own organization, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Venturing into parts of the rural South that even the NAACP had often forsaken and using Baker’s activist network to immerse themselves in local southern communities, SNCC became known as the “shock troops of the civil rights movement.” Even more important, Baker infused her political philosophy into SNCC’s organizing strategy. Convinced that “the little people”—the sharecroppers, maids, and laborers of the rural South—held the keys to ending their own oppression, Baker urged SNCC workers to empower some of the most marginalized and impoverished black southerners. Her “radical democratic vision” shaped SNCC’s development of local, grassroots leadership, or what sociologist Belinda Robnett terms “indigenous bridge leadership,” embodied most spectacularly in Mississippi sharecropper turned activist Fannie Lou Hamer. Baker also modeled new definitions of womanhood for young black and white SNCC women—including Diane Nash, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Sandra “Casey” Hayden, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Jane Stembridge, and Eleanor Holmes Norton—
all of whom found her disavowal of conventional gender conventions liberating and inspiring. Baker's influence is still felt decades later, even if sometimes unknowingly, and often is credited with promoting nonhierarchical and group-centered leadership among today's youth.¹⁶

Both Murray and Baker had links to the nonaligned black Left, which expanded during the 1930s and 1940s in response to the ravages of the Depression as well as to heightened racial violence. Black women artists, writers, journalists, and activists including Grace Campbell, Esther Cooper Jackson, Louise Thompson Patterson, Marvel Cooke, Claudia Jones, Eslanda Robeson, Shirley Graham DuBois, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Beulah (Bea) Richardson, and Charlotta Bass were among the group of radicals that historian Eric McDuffie calls “Black left feminists.” Although not all would embrace the term feminist, they understood that black women faced the “triple oppression” of race, gender and class exploitation.¹⁵ Most adopted a global perspective that connected the fight for racial justice in the United States to liberation struggles in Africa, the Caribbean, and other “Third World” nations. They joined a host of Left and labor organizations, including the Communist Party (USA), the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the National Negro Labor Council, the National Negro Congress, and the Civil Rights Congress, among others. These groups remained active largely in the North and to a lesser extent in the South, until anticommunism and Cold War repression decimated their numbers. Black Left women also formed their own short-lived groups, such as Sojourners for Truth and Justice, which protested racial violence and the sexual abuse of African American women. Their efforts underscore the fact that the struggle for civil rights and black liberation was not simply a southern movement but a northern phenomenon as well. Although they are little known, these women provided an important link to the black freedom and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including black feminism and Black Power feminism. For example, many of them brought their decades-long organizing skills to two of the most important legal defense campaigns of the 1970s in the “Free Angela Davis” case and the Joan Little rape–murder trial. Both campaigns focused attention on the abuse of black women by the criminal justice system and, in the Joan Little case, on the right of women, especially African American and other women of color, to defend themselves against sexual assault.¹⁶

Local Struggles and Black Protest “Up South”

While a spirited debate arose among some scholars regarding these trends, researchers increasingly redirected their attention away from the national movement to local battles—where women’s efforts were usually more visible—and to the movement outside the South.¹⁷ In towns and cities across America, women gave their skills, energies, and even their lives to local black freedom struggles, sometimes in surprising ways. For example, Elna Spaulding, one of the doyennes of the black elite in Durham, North Carolina, reached out to white and black middle-class women and then to low-income women, like local black activist Ann Atwater, to form Women in Action for the Prevention of Violence and Its Causes to ease racial tensions in 1968. Atwater too, broke all conventions when she forged ties with a local Klansman to promote court-ordered school desegregation in Durham.¹⁸

Mississippi, known as the “belly of the beast” for its history of brutal racist
violence, has drawn an inordinate amount of scholarly attention, much of it focused on local efforts. Many of the older black women in Mississippi and throughout the South were known as the “mamas” of the movement. As one SNCC activist put it, they were “usually the militant women in the community—outspoken, understanding, and willing to catch hell, having already caught their share.” Nor were women immune from white violence. Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi sharecropper turned SNCC and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party activist, upstaged the 1964 Democratic National Convention with a graphic account of the horrific police beating she had suffered in retaliation for her voter-registration activities. Hamer worked with white allies, ran for elective office, and was a founding member of the National Women’s Political Caucus. She also spearheaded local antipoverty initiatives such as the Freedom Farm and endorsed armed self-defense and class-based racial solidarity. Hamer was not atypical, as many black women activists across Mississippi embraced similar tactics and politics.

Women were active in local northern movements too, and their efforts frequently predated both the Brown decision and the direct action protest of the 1960s. In the 1940s, Hattie McDaniel, both celebrated and derided for her role as Mammy in Gone with the Wind, challenged housing segregation in Los Angeles all the way to victory in the U.S. Supreme Court. Ella Baker worked with African American and Puerto Rican parents to desegregate schools in New York City in the 1950s. Vel Philips, the first black woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School, in 1951, and the first woman and first African American elected to Milwaukee’s Common Council, in 1956, worked tirelessly against housing segregation. Ruth Batson began her battle to desegregate Boston’s schools in 1949 and soon became head of the New England NAACP. Unlike her southern counterparts, Batson first had to prove that the North segregated its schools and engaged in discriminatory policies that disadvantaged African American students. Two decades after the Brown decision, Batson and other black parents finally won a court-ordered school desegregation lawsuit in Massachusetts.

The same trend can be seen in research on Black Power, where local studies have sometimes brought women’s contributions into sharper focus. In Philadelphia, Black Power activists’ commitment to community organizing meant that the majority of people they worked with were low-income neighborhood women. Local women, like long-time activist Mattie Humphrey, helped build the Black People’s Unity Movement, the city’s first Black Power organization. Women in BPP chapters in Detroit and Cleveland were key to the success of the Panthers’ Free Busing to Prisons program, which enabled inmates to retain crucial connections to families and communities. In Cleveland, Panther member JoAnn Bray’s prison-busing program enjoyed such widespread local support that it remained intact even after the local party collapsed.

Civil Rights versus Black Power

The civil rights movement has frequently been called the *boring struggle*, a term coined by SNCC member Bernice Johnson Reagon to describe the movement’s links to social justice struggles both at home and abroad, including antipoverty, gay rights, and antiwar groups as well as the New Left, student protest, and women’s liberation. Both Margaret Sloan, cofounder of the National Black Feminist
Organization, and Barbara Smith, founder of the Combahee River Collective and most often associated with black lesbian feminism, were first active in northern civil rights movements. Similarly, Frances Beal became a leader in the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus NAACP in the late 1950s. In 1960 she traveled to Paris, where she was exposed to African anticolonial campaigns, met Malcolm X, and read Franz Fanon. Upon her return to the United States in 1966, Beal worked for the NCNW. She also joined the New York City chapter of SNCC, which had already embraced Black Power, where she organized the Black Women’s Liberation Committee, the forerunner to the Third World Women’s Alliance.24

Despite wide agreement about the overlap among social movements, a lively debate continues over the relationship between the civil rights and Black Power movements. Part of the problem is the elusiveness of the term Black Power, which has been used to describe a range of ideologies from revolutionary violence and black separatism to cultural nationalism and black capitalism. One widely held misconception is that Black Power was essentially antiwhite and violent. Discarding the dichotomous “good civil rights” versus “bad Black Power” paradigm, recent research argues for a greater complexity, fluidity, and overlap between the two, while also pressing for finer distinctions between them.25

Scholars have also complicated the assumption that Black Power was an exclusively northern, urban phenomenon that emerged out of the failures of the southern civil rights movement. Many historians trace the southern roots of Black Power and the links between southern and northern Black freedom struggles, especially the role of southern migrants in northern black protest and Black Power movements.26 Including women’s participation often reveals these complexities. For example, civil rights groups such as CORE and SNCC later embraced Black Power politics, but some activists, such as Gloria Richardson, who led the movement in Cambridge, Maryland, utilized both civil rights tactics and Black Power politics simultaneously. Richardson promoted nonviolent protest, black electoral politics, and economic justice in the early 1960s. However, in response to state-sponsored violence and nightrider vigilantism against civil rights activists, she advocated armed self-defense and discouraged Martin Luther King’s participation in their movement. She also befriended Malcolm X during the 1963 Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit, where he delivered his famous “Message to the Grassroots” speech. At a time when blacks were fighting for voting rights protections, Richardson urged Cambridge blacks not to participate in a local referendum on desegregation, arguing that basic citizenship and constitutional rights were guaranteed and should not be decided by popular vote.27

If the civil rights movement has often been sanitized and portrayed as almost exclusively male, the Black Power movement has been even more distorted, leaving Black Power women even less visible than their female civil rights counterparts. In part, this stems from the scholarly focus on formal organizations and membership, which misses large swaths of black women’s radical protest. As historian Rhonda Williams discovered, African American nuns, welfare mothers, and tenant organizers often embraced Black Power politics and rhetoric, even if they did not join Black Power organizations.28

Among all Black Power groups, the BPP has unquestionably attracted the most popular and scholarly attention, and there is vigorous debate among both scholars and former activists about the achievements and the demise of the Panthers and
Black Power generally. Easily the most influential of all the Black Power organizations, the BPP was more of a movement than an organization. Created in Oakland, California in 1966 by southern migrants Bobby Seale and Huey Newton to combat police brutality, it was initially called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Although the BPP was a black organization, it was not a separatist group. Instead, the Panthers adopted a class-analysis and anti-imperialist politics, sometimes working in coalitions with predominantly white antiwar and New Left organizations. The party also forged alliances with revolutionary governments in China and Cuba and with African independence movements. By the 1970s the Panthers engaged in electoral politics, running their own slate of candidates, including BPP Chair Elaine Brown, and supporting Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm’s 1972 U.S. presidential bid.

Historians and activists have also contested the hyper-masculine image of the BPP. In its early years, the party reached out primarily to the “brothers on the block.” However, women joined too, and by the late 1960s they were a majority of Panther members across the country. Indeed, while “gun-barrel politics” have shaped popular perceptions of the Panthers, women predominated in some of the party’s most important achievements, such as the Free Breakfast Programs and People’s Free Medical Clinics. One of the longest-lasting BPP projects was the Oakland Community School, headed by Panther leader Ericka Huggins. These and other “survival programs” provided vital services and political education to impoverished residents in scores of urban black communities.

Tracye Matthews, the first historian to offer a gender analysis of the BPP, challenged activists and scholars who dismissed the survival programs as nonrevolutionary “support work” in contrast to “real” political activity. Illinois Panther Yvonne King made the political aims of this work explicit: “It was done more as an organizing vehicle. Our survival programs heightened the contradiction that existed between the black people and the government. When we were able to feed thousands … parents began to ask, why wasn’t the government doing that?” Certainly FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover understood the political implications of the Panther Free Breakfast Program. While calling the Panthers the greatest threat to the “internal security” of the United States, he singled out the Free Breakfast Program, warning that it was “the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and as such is potentially the greatest threat to efforts to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for.” With such a federal imprimatur, officials targeted the BPP in over 230 of the nearly 300 FBI Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) initiatives against black organizations, harassing and even destroying the Free Breakfast Programs in frequently violent raids on Panther headquarters.

Although women did not escape often illegal government harassment and violent reprisals, the attacks on Panther chapters and arrests of male party leaders did create opportunities for women to assume leadership. As a result, women headed BPP chapters in several cities. The most notable example was Elaine Brown, who assumed national BPP Chair after founder Huey Newton went into exile. But even before Brown’s ascendancy, Panther women such as Kathleen Cleaver and Ericka Huggins were recognized national leaders. Women also edited the party newspaper, the Black Panther, and their presence forced the party to grapple with gender issues. For example, in Oakland, Panther women organized collective approaches to child care and spurred an internal party dialogue around reproduction, parenting, and sexual freedom.
Despite the presence and influence of women, the organization was sometimes guilty of blatant sexism and misogyny. One of the most egregious was Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver’s boast in his widely acclaimed 1968 essay collection, *Soul on Ice*, that he had raped white women to avenge white men’s historic sexual abuse of black women—behavior he repudiated in the book. But he added that he had practiced raping black women first and blamed them for colluding with white men to emasculate black men. Still, while individual Panther men may not have eschewed sexist behavior altogether, the BPP was in the vanguard for its time in challenging conventional gender roles. Huey Newton encouraged coalitions with gay and women’s liberation groups, and men and women often performed similar tasks. Jamal Joseph, who joined the Harlem BPP at age sixteen, recalled that the party was “where I learned not to be a chauvinist.” Even Eldridge Cleaver seemingly renounced his misogynist views when he publicly praised Ericka Huggins’s bravery following her arrest in the wake of her husband’s assassination and called on the “brothers” to “rebuke all manifestations of chauvinism within our ranks.” Nevertheless, Cleaver’s reputation as a wife batterer was an open secret within the BPP and, according to political theorist Joy James, the issue of male violence against women in the BPP “remains somewhat of a taboo among African Americans.” As historian Robyn Spencer concludes, “The Black Panther Party’s record on gender is complex, filled with innovative moments of gender progressiveness as well as moments of blatant misogyny and sexism.”

African American women also played major though rarely recognized roles in other Black Power organizations. Ethel Johnson, who worked with Robert Williams in North Carolina, helped shape the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) when she moved north to Philadelphia, underlining the links between southern and northern activism. Garveyite and former Communist Audley (Queen Mother) Moore, who tutored Malcolm X and Robert Williams, influenced or was a founding member of several Black Power organizations, including RAM, the Congress of African People, and Republic of New Afrika. Grassroots women were also the mainstay of the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, which brought twelve hundred black nationalists and black elected officials together to forge a national black political agenda. Despite women’s contributions as well as the presence of nationally known African American women, including Coretta Scott King, NCNW head Dorothy Height, and Malcolm X’s widow, Betty Shabazz, no women were invited to speak. A year earlier, Gary Convention leader Amiri Baraka (aka LeRoi Jones) and his wife, Amina, had denounced efforts to introduce polygamy into the Committee for a Unified NewArk, but the black nationalist group also publicly proclaimed women’s submissiveness as “natural.” The conflict led to debates among black nationalist women about male chauvinism and pushed Amina Baraka to organize the Black Women’s United Front (BWUF) a few years later.

Indeed, Black Power women found various ways to address their concerns as women, and feminist scholars disagree about the extent to which sexism within the black freedom movement fueled black feminism. The 1970 publication of *The Black Woman*, now a classic, showcased varied responses of African American women to the gender tensions within the black liberation movement. Some Black Power feminists started their own organizations, partly out of frustration with black male sexism and white women’s racial insensitivities. Yet Frances Beal, the catalyst behind the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), never relinquished what she called the “left wing of the revolutionary nationalist wing of Black
Power,” and, as Stephen Ward explains, “the TWWA’s feminism was not simply a critique of Black Power politics but, rather a form of it.” On the other hand, black lesbian feminist scholar and Combahee River Collective member Cheryl Clarke blamed black nationalists directly for increasing the level of homophobia in black communities during the 1960s and 1970s.39

Other Black Power women rejected the association with “feminism” altogether, which they defined as white and bourgeois. Audley Moore called mainstream feminism an “alien ideology.” The BWUF demanded full equality for women and established chapters across the country, but members also debated how and even whether to address sexism within black nationalism, while asserting that racism, capitalism, and imperialism were the major barriers to black women’s liberation. Although US women formed paramilitary units, many accepted women’s subservience to male dominance. Similarly, most Nation of Islam (NOI) women abided by the notion of gender complimentarity rather than equality.40

Movement Allies: White Women and Women of Color

Among women activists, African Americans led the way, but white women and other women of color were allies, sometimes at great risk and sacrifice to themselves and their families. Contrary to popular perception, most of the early white women supporters were southerners. Virginia Durr and Lillian Smith came from well-established southern white families but relinquished the “southern way of life” in the 1930s and 1940s by challenging racial segregation and discrimination. Both paid a price for their apostasy, becoming outlaws in their homeland, but they continued to support black activists and the civil rights movement throughout the 1950s and 1960s.41

Perhaps the most maligned and persistent white southern radical was Anne Braden. Also born to a prominent white family in Alabama, Anne and her husband, Carl, faced subversion charges after selling their home to a black couple in Louisville, just days before the Brown decision. Carl was convicted and jailed on charges under a Kentucky sedition law before the courts finally declared state sedition laws unconstitutional. Like her friend Ella Baker, Anne Braden was an inspiring role model, especially for younger white women activists. Despite ongoing official harassment and marginalization, both Bradens worked tirelessly against white supremacy and economic exploitation, Anne until she died in 2006.42 Northern white women also joined the civil rights movement, and many ventured south during the 1964 Freedom Summer. They were beaten and jailed along with their black fellow activists, but they received more national press coverage than local black activists. Nor were northern whites immune from lethal violence. Detroit housewife Viola Liuzzo was killed by Klansmen during the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery. However, the first whites in the early movement days were mostly southerners, and many faced violence as well as ostracism from families, friends, churches, and schools.43

White women were not the only female allies of the black freedom movement. Women of color also joined with black women and men, often linking their own liberation struggles with those of African Americans. Some embraced Black Power politics. For example, Chinese American Grace Lee Boggs and her husband, James Boggs, a black labor activist, were well-known radicals in Detroit for decades. By the 1970s, they had adopted a multicultural radical politics, rather than black
From 1978 to 1987, they headed a small interracial group, National Organization for an American Revolution. Similarly, Yuri Kochiyama was a Japanese American who had been interred with her family during World War II. After meeting Malcolm X in 1963, she attended his Organization of Afro-American Unity Liberation school, which he formed after breaking with the NOI, and in 1969 she joined the Republic of New Afrika, which called for a separate black “nation within a nation.” In another example, Puerto Rican and Asian American women approached African American women to form the TWWA, which then established solidarity with Chicana and Native American women as well.

In conclusion, despite recent scholarship on women in the civil rights and Black Power movements, there is still much left to uncover. Moreover, this research reveals that examining women’s participation not only enhances our understanding of these movements but also changes much of what we think we already know about them.

**Primary Sources**

Sources on women’s participation are scattered throughout scores of archival collections, newspapers, organizational records, government reports, oral history collections, and manuscript collections of individual women. Many sources have been published, for example, *Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959–1972* (Sanford, NC: Microfilm Corp. of America, 1982) or the collection of women’s speeches edited by Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon in *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009). Find it in your library. Google Preview WorldCat. *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, edited by Clayborne Carson et al. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) Find it in your library. Google Preview WorldCat and published in conjunction with the fourteen-part PBS *Eyes on the Prize* series, includes documents by and about women in civil rights and Black Power struggles. Some sources can be accessed online, such as the Civil Rights History Project National Survey of Collections, a joint project of the Library of Congress and Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History and Culture, which is a good place to start. Other important collections can be found at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York; the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in Atlanta; the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University in Washington, DC; the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison; the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the Columbia University Civil Rights Project in New York; Duke University David Rubenstein Rare Books and Manuscript Library in Durham, NC; the Stanford University King Research and Education Institute in California; and the National Archives, among many others. Local and state libraries and historical societies, as well as private colleges, universities, and community centers also house materials on women.

**Further Reading**


**Notes**


18. Greene, *Our Separate Ways*.


33. Chicago police, working with the FBI, conducted several raids on Panther headquarters, leading to a shoot-out and the destruction of the Breakfast Program in one raid and, in another raid, the police shooting death of Panther leader Fred Hampton while he was asleep in his bed. Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot*, 173, 175–180; Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 186, 188–189.

34. Angela Davis (though not a Panther) and Assata Shakur are undoubtedly the most well-known black women radicals targeted by police and the FBI. Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur (members of the “Panther 21”) were also caught up in police/FBI raids before being acquitted of all charges. Angela Davis, *Angela: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam/Random House, 1974); Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987).


Many women played important roles in the Civil Rights Movement, from leading local civil rights organizations to serving as lawyers on school segregation lawsuits. Their efforts to lead the movement were often overshadowed by men, who still get more attention and credit for its successes in popular historical narratives and commemorations. Many women experienced gender discrimination and sexual harassment within the movement and later turned towards the feminist movement in the 1970s. The Civil Rights History Project interviews with participants in the struggle include both expressions of pride Black women have been involved in American socio-political issues and advocating for the community since the American Civil War era through organizations, clubs, community-based social services, and advocacy. Black women are currently underrepresented in the United States in both elected offices and in policy made by elected officials. Although data shows that women do not run for office in large numbers when compared to men, Black women have been involved in issues concerning identity, human rights See more ideas about Civil rights movement, Civil rights, Black history. Great Black Women in History Barbara Jordan Barbara Charline Jordan (February 21, 1936 – January 17, 1996) was an American politician who was both a product, and a leader, of the Civil Rights movement. She was the first African-American elected to the Texas Senate after reconstruction and the first Southern black woman ever elected to the US House of Representatives. She received the...