Voter Registration

The Role of Female Leadership within the Civil Rights Movement:

Septima Clark and Fannie Lou Hamer

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The roles of women within the civil rights movement have historically been unappreciated. When grade school students, and those in high school, learn of the civil rights movement they are given names that are said to be the most important during the time period, names such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. These names do not usually include women such as Fannie Lou Hamer or Septima Clark. "Too often the African American women who participated in the movement remain invisible, elusive, or unappreciated."[1] While much of the emphasis in the civil rights movement is put on male leaders and ministers of the time, the reality is that only about 10% of the ministers within the South were actually active in the movement.[2] Women played a significant role in the civil rights movement by being organizers, participants, and most importantly leaders who provided guidance and direction. In "Men Led, but Women Organized," Charles Payne discusses the importance of women and their leadership roles within the movement. "Women canvassed more than men, showed up more often at mass meetings and demonstrations, and more frequently attempted to register to vote."[3] Women were involved in voter registration, led meetings in town halls, participated in church groups, and held political rallies. The movement would allow for different leaders to develop and allowed women to be participants as well as organizers. Women's influence in the movement was more pronounced than many other leaders, making their roles irreplaceable.

Without the role that female leaders took the movement would not have been successful. Women were responsible for participating in various organizations as well as raising awareness to the public and providing leadership throughout the movement. Examples of these leadership roles

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1 Mary Ellen Curtin, *The Practice of US Women's History* "Strong People and Strong Leaders" (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 308

2 Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom (*Berkley: University of California Press, 1995), 41

3 Crawford, Vicki L, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (New York: Carlson, 1990), 2

can be seen in women such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Septima Clark. Hamer was an active participant in many organizations of the movement, including the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was also a founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Clark participated in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as well as being a founder and teacher in citizenship schools that spread across the South. These two women were effective leaders within the movement because they did not only raise awareness, but would also educate others, teaching them to be effective leaders. By analyzing the lives of these two women, historians can witness the importance of women's leadership roles during the movement.

In the 1960s many women challenged traditional roles and became involved in political activism. These represented changes in women's roles and activism, allowing more women to come forward in search of racial equality. College students began to join organizations such as the SNCC, which promoted activism and voter registration during the civil rights movement. These organizations helped with many aspects of the movement, especially the creation of female leaders. "They created new arenas- social space- within which women could develop a new sense of self-worth and independence."[4] Women came together to show commitment to making a change and in finding comfort in the social support system of their peers.

Two women civil rights leaders stand out among others because of their connections with fellow colleagues and their participation in the movement, leadership skills, courage in the face of adversity, and their personal relationship with the movement and what it represented. Fannie Lou Hamer and Septima Clark contributed differently to the civil rights movement, yet each of these women used their positions as leaders to establish social change during the time period. Each

[4] Sarah Evans *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 221

focused on voter registration and promoting the voting rights and education in the South for African Americans and racial minorities. Each was active in different organizations, grew up in different economic and cultural circumstances, and appealed to various audiences, but each contributed to making the movement successful. History may remember the male leaders of the time, but the males were most commonly only participants on the large-scale portion of the movement, while women gained control on the local levels. "Black women extended their roles within church communities and secular organizations to organize for political change."[5] These women who participated at the local level were the most important of the time period. They would not only press for political and social change, but would gain the trust of their supporters as well.

Fannie Lou Hamer was born on October 6, 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She grew up living in poverty, the youngest of twenty children living on a plantation in Mississippi and spent her days working in the cotton fields to help provide for her family. She was not only a participant during the movement, but also worked three jobs as a plantation timekeeper, selling insurance, and a as domestic worker. These occupations would prove to be beneficial to her role as a leader because they allowed her to use and develop stronger leadership skills and enhance her ability to relate to others. Because she would work with the public, she would learn how to interact with all different kinds of people expanding her self-confidence even more and this led to new doors that would be opened to her activism. Workers viewed Hamer as one of the strongest timekeepers in the plantation system. She was fair to the employees on the plantation, even at the cost of her own relationship with the plantation owner.[6] Hamer openly defied her employer by changing the balances on cotton scales in order to give the workers their fair share of the profits,

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[5] Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds. *Sister's in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights - Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 211

[6] Lee, 19

risking her own job to ensure the safety and well-being of others.[7] Hamer's roles as a leader began at the local level and expanded to influence the civil rights movement by increasing female participation and voter registration throughout the South.[8]

Septima Clark was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1898.She became a school teacher in 1916 at eighteen years old and taught in segregated African American schools. Clark joined the NAACP in 1918 while teaching at Johns Island off of the coast of Charleston. At this school Clark would be one of only two teachers for 132 African American children. This school would have no funding and no recognition because it was used to educate African Americans. In the years 1949-1950 the average amount spent on African American students would be $54.00, much lower than the amount spent on white students, at $113.00 spent per each white student.[9] African American educators would be paid substantially less, about $600.00 less a year for their positions than white educators.[10] Clark would not stop at Johns Island and instead pressed forward in educating youth how to read and write and would spend her nights off educating adults to do the same. Her goal was to ensure that all of these African Americans, regardless of their age, would be able to read, write, and pass the voter registration test.

Authors that have written about the movement have interpreted the significance of leadership in multiple ways. In her book *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left,* Sara Evans discusses the significance of women's roles and leadership within the civil rights movement. Evans' book discusses the role of female participants throughout the civil rights movement and how it was impacted by the feminist movement of the time as well. Black and white women alike achieved positions in the 1960s that

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7 Lee, 19
8 Ibid, ix
9 Charron, 357
10 Ibid

would give them strength in the movement. Evans describes the new strength and self-worth that women developed during the civil rights movement. "Like their Foremothers in the nineteenth century they confronted this dilemma with the tool the movement itself had given them: a language to name and describe oppression: a deep belief in freedom, equality, and community—soon to be translated into 'sisterhood'; a willingness to question and challenge any social institution that failed to meet human needs; and the ability to organize."[11] Women, Evans notes, used the social ties that they shared for many years to support the movement.

Evans also describes the importance of educators within the civil rights movement; this is pertinent to the discussion of leadership roles because most often women who were leaders would take on the position of teachers, such as Septima Clark. "Many of the freedom summers would gain the support of younger followers, thanks in large part to the contribution of teachers and other participants in the movement."[12] By focusing on the role that women played in the education system of the period, Evans recognizes the importance of connections and support systems created with other women. One of her studies described how household lifestyles would be a precursor for activism. Women who grew up in radical or activist families would be more likely to practice activism. College age women would see how their mothers lived and by watching their influence, they would set out to make a change within their communities.[13]

Robnett, author of *How Long? How Long?* discusses the development of bridge leaders during the civil rights movement. Bridge leaders were female participants in smaller groups that had the power to connect ideas to the larger organizations that had developed during the time,

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[11] Evans, 100
[12] Ibid, 72
[13] Ibid, 39

therefore identifying their importance to the community and the movement.[14] Without these women who had the power to connect and "bridge" the gap between organizations, many of the ideas of the public and women involved would not have been as accessible to larger organizations such as the NAACP. These leaders had the ability to present new ideas to those involved in the movement. Different levels of leadership would be identified, grassroots leaders, frontline leaders, and bridge leaders, all of which are identified as important during the movement.

Charles Payne also focuses on the lives of women leaders and activists. In *I've Got the Light of Freedom* Payne identifies the various roles that women filled and their lives throughout the movement, in order to identify the importance of leadership. Payne focuses on women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, and many others in his work, as he depicts how it was possible to create change in the movement because of the role that leaders would play. Payne identifies that "social history has tended to ignore or forget the record of ordinary people."[15] These "ordinary people" as he describes them would be the leadership that the movement needed, without those that would work behind the scenes during the movement; it would not have been successful. What Payne does throughout this entire work is bring to light people that social history has forgotten and the roles that they would take as leaders during the movement. Payne breaks down the roles of leaders throughout different time periods, including pre-civil rights movement and the time during the movement. Payne views the leaders of this movement as being interested in creating the ability within people to create and re-shape their own lives.[16] Leaders prepared individuals to create their own change within communities and themselves, they pushed the public in the right direction towards social change.

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[14] Robnett, 20
[15] Payne, 2
[16] Ibid, 68

Susan Lynn's book, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times* provides a description of the social groups created during the civil rights movement and female participants of these various clubs and organizations.[17] Lynn suggests that after the 1950s women began to understand how they could participate in the movement, and how they could contribute to the movement. Women would begin to ban together in social groups ranging from the NAACP to SNCC and would discuss the problems of the time period. These groups would allow those who were interested in leading to come forward and would facilitate the development of leadership roles. These groups would help lead Hamer and Clark toward their positions as women in organizations first, than later would develop their roles into that of leaders. By participating in these organizations, women gained the confidence and abilities to lead and create other groups that would aide in the development of equal rights. Hamer would start her activism involved in SNCC, but would later move on to develop her own party, the MFDP. Clark on the other hand, would work with the NAACP until her citizenship schools would begin to expand across the South. Lynn describes the importance of activists from different age levels and how it was not merely the work of earlier, older activists who made a difference in the movement, but also the work of the younger population who contributed to the movement in all different organizations, the most popular of these was SNCC.[18]

Chana Kai Lee's *For Freedom's Sake* suggests that even women who grew up with nothing such as Hamer, those who grew up in Mississippi and dropped out of school to support their families, could influence a movement for gender and racial equality. Lee describes the positive influence that Hamer had on other participants in the movement, including the use of song and

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[17] Susan Lynn *Progressive Women in Conservative Tim: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 13

[18] Ibid

Bible references to keep the morale of other participants up during times of doubt. "For the most part it was Hamer who kept the prisoners in good spirits. She drew on her extensive knowledge of the Bible, periodically reciting appropriate verses when it looked as if the group was about to lose faith that it would make it out alive."[19] By singing songs and quoting the Bible, Hamer was moving back to methods provided by her mother in order to comfort and provide strength to other activists. Hamer would use the influence of the Bible as well as her own strength to interact and gain the trust of those that she was leading. She would take situations, such as the event at Winona, Mississippi where Hamer and other activists were arrested and beaten, and used these events to create a bond between herself and her "foot soldiers" as she called them.

Without the roles that women played in the civil rights movement as behind the scenes organizers, frontline participants, and leaders, many of the leadership roles of the time would have been unfilled. Many aspects of Hamer and Clark's lives are representative of what it took to become a memorable leader during the civil rights movement. Each area of their lives was beneficial to the movement and leadership skills that the developed during the period. The aspects that should be focused on include: the role that upbringing played in involvement, their education and its influence, the leadership roles that they filled, sexual separation during the movement, the impact of religion on their leadership, and the hardships that these women would face. All of these aspects are equally important to understanding how these women became such influential leaders in the movement.

Much can be learned about the movement by studying female activism and leadership. Leadership took on many different forms within the movement, from the frontlines of oppression to small church organizations; there were many spheres in which leadership was possible.

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[19] Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 57

Leadership roles during the civil rights movement included many different kinds of people. These positions would be anything from grassroots leaders, who united people on the community level, to bridge leaders, who united small and larger organizations across the South. Katherine Mellen Charron notes, "African American women involved in local civil rights movements relied on a variety of leadership skills to organize their neighbors. Foremost among these skills was 'meeting people where they were' and being a good listener. Only then could leaders recognize their community's strategic strength and diffuse internal conflicts as events unfolded."[20] While the media focused on male ministers or more radical male activists, women contributed to the movement by being organizers and by understanding the importance of leadership on the home front.

Fannie Lou Hamer is a woman who deserves respect as a leader. Many different ideas would contribute to her leadership roles. One of the aspects that contributed to Hamer's leadership during the civil rights movement was her childhood and education. Chana Kai Lee, Hamer's most recent biographer states, "Perhaps nothing could have put her more effectively on a direct path to political activism than her own agonizing childhood."[21] She worked in the cotton fields sometimes daily as a child and would pick 200-300 pounds of cotton next to members of her family.

> Life was very hard; we never hardly had enough to eat; we didn't have clothes to wear. We had to work real hard, because I started working when I was about six years old. I didn't have a chance to go to school too much, because school would only last about four months at the time when I was a kid going to school. Most of the time we didn't have clothes to wear to that [school]; and then if any work would come up that we would have to do, the parents would take us out of the school to cut stalks and burn stalks or work in dead lands or things like that. It was just really tough as a kid when I was a child.[22]

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[20] Katherine Mellen Charron *Freedoms Teacher* (New Chapel: University of North Carolina Press: 2009), 351

[21] Ibid, 11

[22] Fannie Lou Hamer, interview by Colin Edwards, *The Freedom Democratic Party*, Pacifica Foundation, March 30, 2010

Hamer‘s mother was one of the most influential people to Hamer, and she was a woman described as being a “fighter in every way.”[23] Hamer did not give up easily in a fight, and would stand her ground throughout many trials and hardships, much like her mother did as well. This aspect would make her an admirable leader. Hamer was described as courageous, bold, and brave, traits that were beneficial to her and traits that reminded people of her mother. She was politically active within the local arena and would spend most of her time working with organizations that allowed her to work beside other participants that actively sought out change. Hamer was recognized for her status as a public figure and was respected by people from all over the state and nation. She would lose her job working on the plantation because of her activism and in order to survive Hamer would work many different jobs, including work as a teacher for Septima Clark’s citizenship schools and as a field secretary for SNCC.[24] These positions would enhance her public image, creating a civil rights leader where there had once been a woman struck by poverty.

Activists would chose to work in different realms of the movement, one of the largest being a focus on education. Education was an important aspect, not only to the civil rights movement, but also to voter registration in the South. The situation at the time required African Americans of voting age to pass a test of their literacy skills. Many leaders throughout the movement would make it their prerogative to teach the younger generation, as well as the older generation, how to prepare for the voter registration test. This test would not be easy and only 42% of the state of Mississippi was able to register in the 1960s, the rest of the population would encounter challenges because of their race. The test would consist of twenty-one questions, all of which would interpret

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(originally aired 1965). EBSCO Host
[23]Lee, 11
[24] Payne, 155

any part of the state constitution. Mississippi's state constitution would include over 285 sections, any of these sections could be covered in the test and there was no way for uneducated people to pass.[25] After Hamer attempted to register for the first time in 1962, she was informed by the plantation she worked on that unless her registration was withdrawn she would be fired from her position as timekeeper. Hamer refused to withdraw her resignation stating that she was registering for herself, not for the plantation owner. Her refusal to withdraw led to the loss of her job and eventually the loss of her husband's job as well. Yet, Hamer continued to press towards voter equality and became one of the first African Americans in Mississippi to pass the registration test.

Leaders were very important during the movement because they would help others pursue education that enabled them to pass the voter registration test. Hamer had difficulty obtaining a formal education and because of her situation, living on a plantation she received schooling only four months a year.[26] Children, like Hamer, received less education than their white counterparts even though they comprised over fifty percent of Mississippi's population during the sixties.[27] Hamer would not continue school after the age of twelve, but instead would continue to study reading and writing through her church group, Strangers Home Baptist Church. This would be the route that many African Americans would have pursued during days when slavery was still legal in the South showing how little things had changed in the last hundred years.[28] After obtaining her education, Hamer would work to find individuals that wished to vote and would prepare them to register. Hamer's church inspired her to get out and register to vote. She stated that until 1962, when she did register to vote, that she knew nothing of the constitution, voting, and nothing of

[25] Payne, 115
[26] Lee,5
[27] Ibid,4
[28] Ibid, 7

what the public was capable of doing in regards to overthrowing members of the government.[29]

Without the ability to read and write, Hamer would not have passed the voter registration test. She used her upbringing, as a woman who had no formal education, to inspire those who were like her, women who learned of their rights recently and did not know how they could make a difference.

Hamer's position on the frontline of the movement and her connection with participants made her an effective leader because of the interpersonal relationship that developed with those she led. Hamer knew that the road to equality was hard, this aspect allowed her to interact with others more effectively. She chose to work with SNCC, an organization that made connections with the younger population of the time period. SNCC helped Hamer register to vote, working with Strangers Home Baptist Church in getting the word out regarding voter registration and for this reason, Hamer would place her allegiance in them. SNCC would prove to help all areas of voters and work with the local, grassroots level of the movement. Hamer is what someone would refer to as a frontline, or grassroots leader. A woman who would work within the communities and with the participants to create awareness on a home front level. Hamer and SNCC had many of the same ideas regarding leadership and voter registration, including working with people on the same level that they were.

Hamer overcame issues that were not solely directed to her race, but also to her role as a woman. This issue was most prominent to her during her time spent in jail in Winona, Mississippi. Hamer and other activists were returning from a conference where they learned how to better promote voter registration and they pulled into a rest stop in Winona on their way home. Upon entering the rest stop, Hamer noticed the arrival of police vehicles and witnessed those getting off

[29]Hamer Interview

of the bus being arrested. She stepped off of the bus to be with the rest of the participants, not wanting them to be alone, and all of them were arrested. After being arrested they were denied rights to a phone call and were left in jail cells. After a few hours, the police brutality would begin as the participants were taken into separate rooms one by one and beaten brutally. Women arrested would not only suffer the beatings and brutality at the hands of the police, but also faced extreme sexual humiliation as they were forced to undress in front of male officers. The part of this experience that rang strongest with Hamer was when the guards turned members of the same race against one another. African American inmates in Winona were forced to physically abuse the women that came in beating them with leather straps until they could no longer stand.[30] They would be physically beaten, emotionally abused, and left with their morale at its lowest point ever. Hamer would promote her abilities as a leader by keeping the morale high within the participants, singing church hymns, repeating Bible verses, and refusing to give up her beliefs.

Hamer motivated participants by singing God's word, she would push many participants through their hardest moments. "I've got the Light of Freedom" became a slogan for Hamer, and was sang in all aspects of the movement encouraging participation and unity. This song was her favorite because it depicted how everyone had the same part of freedom's light, the same end goal, and people kept this light close to their heart during the movement.[31] Songs used for motivation would be true for many activists, including Rosa Parks a fellow activist in the movement. "We would pray a lot. One thing we used to do to keep us going was the moving words of certain hymns, many of which were passed down to us from the slave days. They gave us a sense of togetherness with our people. Singing gave us the feeling that —with God's help— we could

[30] Hamer Inerview
[31] Payne, 5

overcome what were facing."[32] Religion would be only one aspect of these women's leadership roles, it joined women under one common belief system, and moved them towards a common goal.

After the event at Winona, Hamer pressed forward towards creating an effective social change, creating the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) supported the individual rights of all people, not just the rights of African American women, but also defended the rights of Jewish, Latinos, and other minorities that were misunderstood or under-represented within the movement.[33] Hamer would identify the importance of the MFDP in means of equality by stating, "The World can see that we are not free here in America. If we are not free, than no one else in America is free either."[34] She was highly vocal in her beliefs that racial equality was an important element within the South as well as throughout America. Hamer reached out towards all aspects of the public because she saw the issue of equality as being about more than just African Americans, but about all Americans. She was not the only individual that saw the benefits of the MFDP and racial equality. "The MFDP was an outgrowth of a statewide effort to remedy the severe social and political oppression of African Americans."[35] African American people in Mississippi required much more activism than other areas in the United States. Segregation in Mississippi was higher than other southern states because of the intensity of white resistance to the movement.[36] Hamer stated that Mississippi was a state that was only allowed back into the Union after the Civil War if they granted African Americans the right to vote, following the 15th amendment of the constitution in 1870. Hamer view this as being a violation of not only the 15th amendment, but also the 13th and 14th and that something needed to be done to encourage the rights given to everyone in the constitution. Often

[32] Rosa Parks *Quiet Strength* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 58-59
[33] Hamer interview
[34] Hamer Interview
[35] Collier and Thomas, 121
[36] Ibid

she would question whether the constitution meant anything to anybody.[37] Voting privileges were granted to African Americans, but they were nearly impossible to obtain. Many African Americans would not be able to vote still because of the harsh regulations that were placed upon them and in the 1960s only three percent of registered voters in the South were African American.[38] One of the largest areas of discrimination would take place within the lower class and working class individuals. What is important to note about this is that in the 1960s the MFDP was comprised mostly of the individuals of these lower class status levels.[39]

Septima Clark was a beneficial woman to the civil rights movement for many different reasons. Not only was she a teacher who spent most of her life educating African Americans in passing voter registration tests, how to read, and how to write, but she also educated people in how to become leaders and was a positive role model for others. Despite all of the adversity that came from being a political activist during times of turmoil, Clark would maintain her composure and bring about change for her community and across the South. Much like Hamer, Clark worked towards promoting awareness during the movement, but took another route towards her role as a leader. She was not as prominent on the frontlines of the movement, but instead would organize behind-the-scenes to make the movement effective.

Clark was forced to leave her position as a school teacher on Johns Island of the coast of Charleston, South Carolina in 1956 after state legislative banned government and state employees from participating in civil rights organizations. She would continue to pursue equality in all situations and even promoted the NAACP to the public, sending out letters and pushing for participation. “I signed my name to 726 letters to black teachers asking them to tell the state of

[37] Hamer Interview
[38] Collier and Thomas, 124
[39] Ibid, 125

South Carolina it was unjust to rule that no city or state employee could belong to the NAACP. If whites could belong to the KKK, surely blacks could belong to the NAACP."[40] After her dismissal, Clark joined with Highlander Folk School, an African American school in South Carolina that would transfer its area of focus, voter preparation and equality of education, to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1961. The organization worked with ministers such as Martin Luther King Jr. Clark, along with many others were asked to participate in these citizenship schools with the SCLC. and Clark even was promised 6,000 dollars a year in order to help lead the schools and organizations.[41] Highlander Folk School would work hand in hand with organizations such as SNCC to make a larger impact on the people in the South. "With the help of the SNCC boys and girls, and the SCLC's conferences staff, we put 9,000 black registered voters on the books."[42] Because of the unification of these two organizations, change would take place on the larger scale. Participants could combine their leadership skills in order to get others registered to vote, leading to the success of the movement..

Citizenship schools worked in conjunction with Highlander School, an organization that promoted the education of African Americans interested in voting. Citizenship schools would increase substantially between their creation and 1961 when there were thirty-seven citizenship schools established on the islands or on the mainland near the island systems, increasing the amount of registered black voters substantially. Clark was specifically responsible for training over eighty-one teachers in the citizenship schools even though these schools were switched to be under the rule of SCLC in 1961.[43] Teachers were one of the most important aspects of these schools because they had the ability to motivate and teach people the skills necessary to pass the

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[40] Charron, 37

[41] Septima Clark, "Interview with Septima Poinsette," interview by Eugene Walker, July 30, 1976, Documenting the American South, http://docsouth.unc.edu/ sohp/G-0017/G-0017.html (accessed May 20, 2010), 6

[42] Ibid, 6

[43] Payne, 74

tests. “The teachers we need in a citizenship school should be people who are respected by the members of the community, who can read well aloud, and who can write their names in cursive writing. These are the ones that we looked for. We were trying to make teachers out of these people who could barely read and write, but they could teach.”[44] African Americans who grew up in areas of racial segregation had difficulty trusting anyone they considered an outsider, fearing that these people would judge them for being illiterate.

Clark’s citizenship schools became an important organizing tool for young activists in Mississippi and all across the South. They were a non-threatening way to involve all kinds of people in the movement. Without the trust that female teachers and their students shared there would be no use in having these schools because nobody would attend. “Black people from small towns did not trust black people coming in from the city. They just thought they were so high falutin that you were going to make fun of them. The illiterate blacks in these communities were ashamed to let people know that they were illiterate.”[45] Clark focused on creating a comfortable environment for people to work within, a place where African Americans would not be intimidated to ask for help or feel insecure because they did not know the answers to all the questions.

Clark would work with what the people knew, in her teaching she would practice math with basic farming arithmetic and teach reading with the state legislation of the time period. “We used election laws of that particular state to teach the reading. We used the amount of fertilizer and the amount of seeds to teach arithmetic, how much they would pay for it.”[46] The search for teachers within the movement only needed one thing. “We were looking for those who could read well aloud and who could write legibly to come and be trained and go back into their communities

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[44] Charron, 76
[45] Ibid, 66
[46] Interview with Septima, 8

and work with the illiterate. We didn't need anyone with a high school education, nor did we need anyone with a college education. We just wanted to have a community person, so that the illiterates would feel comfortable and happy."[47] Because she would do this, Clark would include an audience that would previously be ignored, the audience of lower class individuals. Clark was necessary during the movement because she created an environment that could not be duplicated. She created a sense of self and accomplishment within people while setting up jobs and equal opportunities for everyone she came in contact with. The teaching curriculum supported the lower class, and individuals were able to learn in their own way.

Once the school became funded they became a source of income for those fired from their jobs because of activism. Clark, who grew up in poverty herself as the daughter of two former slaves, would know the impact that socio-economic status had on participants. "I could always work with them. We'll I've been one of them all my life. I've been a poverty-stricken, low income person, and I know how to work with them."[48] These organizations did not supply just an education, but a way of life, a system that could be admired by many. This system would be operated by people who had no formal education, but were willing to learn and willing to teach.

Leadership would not stop with the role of education, but spread into the development of new leaders. A real leader would view other participants as being just as important, if not more important, than they were. "The basic purpose of citizenship schools is discovering local community leaders. It is my belief that creative leadership is present in any community and only awaits discovery and development."[49] Clark would not only be a teacher, but an organizer, a liaison between those she taught and the NAACP. Clark took on the role of bridge leader, a

[47] Ibid
[48] Ibid, 2
[49] Payne, 75

woman who would combined being a leader to a group of people, as well as a behind the scenes organizer. “One of Septima Clark’s successes as a professional bridge leader was her ability to connect the politics of the movement to the needs of the people. She did so through frame extension, by making the needs of the people one of the SCLC’s priorities. She found that by listening to the problems of the potential rural constituents, the latter became willing to listen to the teachers’ transformative message.”[50] Clark was influential in creating connections with the public and understanding what it was that people wanted by listening to them.

Clark suggested that people should be made into leaders and that the same people should not constantly be seen at the front line of the movement. “I sent a letter to Dr. King asking him not to lead all of the marches himself, but instead to develop leaders who could lead their own marches.”[51] Clark’s citizenship schools were seen as “establishing local community leaders.”[52] Clark, in her autobiography, describes how she felt it was necessary for people to move away from Martin Luther King Jr. as the sole leader of the movement often telling people: “You’re there. You’re going to ask the leader to come everywhere? Can’t you do the leading in these places?” [53] The roles that leadership played during the movement were significant, without the role of women who recognized the importance of community leaders as well as established leaders, the movement would have focused on only a few individuals.

One of the problems that Clark encountered on the path towards equality revolved around segregation of the sexes. After citizenship schools transferred their area of focus to the SCLC Clark would notice the segregation. “Well, I think that we live in man-made world, and because of

[50]Robnett, 90
[51]Payne, 76
[52]Lee, 75
[53]Clark, 77

that, he didn't feel as if a women had really enough intelligence to do a thing like I was doing."[54] Clark would be doing a job that many men did not believe she could do. Because she was a woman, men viewed her as inferior and she wanted to prove that she could do it as well. Many other female activists would recognize the imbalance in the sexes and the fear that men had in regards to women with brains. In an interview with Clark, she discussed other women's opinions on the subject, focusing on Ella Baker's opinion the most. "She told me many of the things that she disliked about men and that they disliked about her, a woman. She had brains. And because of the brain power that she had, they did not like the things that she said to them."[55] These opinions were common between the sexes during the movement, but leadership during the movement knew no gender. Clark and other activists had a hard road to travel even though Clark had the support of Dr. King himself it would still be difficult. When asked why Clark would be on the executive board of the SCLC King would reply: "She (Clark) was the one who proposed the citizenship education which is bringing to us not only money, but a lot of people who will register and vote."[56] Even with King's positive feedback about Clark, her position would still be questioned because she was a woman. Without Clark's ideas that brought forth the citizenship schools and equal education, the movement would have been drastically different, the movement towards voter equality lessened.

The SCLC, like other Christian organizations of the time that focused on Martin Luther King Jr. and his teachings about non-violence, believed that love and faith in God would be enough. While Clark did share many of these views about God's forgiveness, she did not always believe that non-violence was the answer. In a period of so much violence it was difficult for anyone to remain non-violent, including someone as religious as Clark. She would attend the court

[54] Clark Interview, 10
[55] Ibid
[56] Ibid, 6

hearing in support of Hamer and her experience in Winona and remembered thinking violent thoughts during the entire trial. " I wished that a chandelier would drop on their heads and kill them. My mind wasn't non-violent. And I don't think I have gotten to the place today where my mind is quite non-violent, because I still have feelings at times that I'd like to do something violently to stop people." The non-violent train of thought was not easy to adapt to and this was another roadblock that Clark would have to overcome. During times when people like Hamer were being beaten and thrown in jail, Clark was trying to adapt her thoughts to more non-violent behavior, which proved to be difficult for her.

Clark was no so prominent on the frontlines of the movement, but spent more of her time organizing events and keeping individuals educated on the matters that were occurring. After the citizenship schools became more prominent and were able to prepare individuals for voter registration, other organizations would get into the habit of registering people to vote as well. The process of registering individuals to vote would be a long and tedious process that would eventually grow to include SNCC, NAACP, The Urban League, CORE, and eventually the SCLC, all of which were prominent organizations during the time.

These women were both influential because they took completely different routes towards being a leader. They were not given their roles as leaders, but had to work in order to obtain them. These women would interact and affect their audience in different ways, but never the less they would both be influential. Leadership took on multiple different roles including bridge leaders and grassroots leaders, and the influence of these leaders would spread out across the South and nation. Women, such as Clark, taught people what they needed to pass voter registration tests. Hamer would get people interested in the voting process by showing them what they could achieve with voting. These two women had two completely different roles that they would take as a leader. Yet,

throughout all of these differences, they both were effective with what their roles. Hamer would go to many of Clark's conferences, and the two women would often interact together. Hamer would bring people into the voting booths and Septima Clark would ensure that they would be able to pass the tests that were necessary to register for voting.

Without the roles that women played as leaders within the civil rights movement, the movement would not have been as successful. The active leadership roles that women took on in the movement would be responsible for gaining followers as well as aiding in the emergence of new leaders. Women such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Septima Clark would be responsible for educating participants on the importance of voter registration. Regardless of the hardships that may have arise during the time period, the events at Winona, the segregation between the sexes and the races, and the failure of the justice system, these women leaders continued to press forward towards a change they all desired. Hamer would continue to fight after her experience in Winona, eventually creating the MFDP, a party that would search for equality within the Democratic Party in Mississippi. Clark would be active even after losing her position as an educator because of her activism. Using the faith that they had in God and praising his love through song or through work with the SCLC, these women would be able to inspire others in all situations. These women took on two very different leadership roles, but they would change the movement in ways that exceeded any expectation.

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