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Proposal

During the civil rights movement, African Americans looked to major leaders in the movement to lead, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. However, underneath all of the charisma and speeches, another group was in support of the movement: the women who organized it all. Women were rarely placed in the spotlight because of their inability to take leadership in the civil rights movement. Major leaders such as King were particularly sexist in this respect, by preventing women’s presence in his group of advisors, or by letting them take major leadership within the movement. The proposed essay will question why women were unable to take leadership in the civil rights movement, and will focus primarily on civil rights activist Ella Baker as an example of women’s struggle for leadership.

The main person that this paper will focus on as evidence of this struggle is civil rights activist Ella Josephine Baker. As a member of African-American rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Baker was a critical part of the movement. In many interviews, Ella Baker outlines her struggle within the movement’s system, and her inability to be taken seriously beyond being an organizer. For example, when she first moved to work with the SCLC, Baker was placed in a role as a secretary, working out of a hotel room and sending out memos to other members of the SCLC.

Ella Baker is an excellent example of women in the civil rights movement because she was present and involved throughout the entire effort. She joined the NAACP in the 1920s and worked with them tirelessly through the peak of the movement, in the 1950s and 1960s, when
she joined forces with the SCLC and helped to form the SNCC. She understood the entire movement over much of the twentieth century.

This paper will address many important issues, and may be somewhat controversial in the way that it challenges traditional views of the civil rights movement. This paper will make accusations against organizations that are well respected amongst Americans, such as the SCLC, for being sexist. Primary sources accuse extremely influential leaders such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for sexism against women within the movement, more specifically, Ella Baker. In order to prove this accusation, primary sources must be found that explicitly prove the sexism of somebody like King.

Another issue that this topic may face is the problem of Ella Baker’s involvement in the civil rights movement is that Ella Baker actually was able to achieve some amount of influence in the movement after spending large portions of her time working for it. Her struggle should be enumerated so that it is easier to understand the difficulty to become an influential leader. Many people may make the argument that women were always important as organizers, and had the ability to influence their male counterparts, who served as leaders. This paper will argue that despite this, the credit that important women such as Ella Baker deserve exceeds the praise that they received for their organization.

Of all of the sources being used or considered in this research, the most important are the primary sources, especially those provided by Ella Baker herself. In addition, Baker wrote articles for journals, such as “Bigger Than A Hamburger” in Southern Patriot, and conducted interviews with Eugene Walker, Susan Thrasher, and Gerda Lerner. The interviews are most likely the most informative of all primary sources because she gave long explanations for her experience as an important member of the civil rights movement. The articles are informative as
well because they were written to influence other members of the movement and make an impression on them.

Secondary sources have proven to be easy to find, and many have been extremely informative. Secondary sources on the civil rights movement have varying and diverse topics. The books by Joanne Grant and Barbara Ransby have been the most informative, as they focus primarily on Ella Baker. It is from those books that many primary sources were found, in addition to secondary sources that pertain to more than just Baker specifically. Many sources were obtained on Martin Luther King Jr. and also on organizations that Baker was involved in, such as the SCLC and then SNCC.

Ella Baker took issue with civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and his apparent sexism towards women as major leaders. This paper looks to enumerate first why she felt that leadership such as King’s was not as productive, and secondly, how this inhibited her ability to influence and progress the movement because of her gender.
Bibliography


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Martin Luther King was a great American who worked for civil rights in the United States in the 1950s and 60s. He fought for the rights of African Americans and many people, blacks as well as whites, supported him. In 1964 he received the Nobel Peace Prize. King was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. He had a brother, Alfred and a sister, Christine. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. an important figure in the American Civil Rights Movement. He organized many important events in the 1960s that finally led to the victory of the Civil Rights Movement. Similarly, Malcolm X was also involved in a movement that fought for improving the rights of the African American people. One of the main purposes of this study is to explain how Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X differed in their struggle for equality of African Americans. Key Words: Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Civil Rights Movement, Civil...