

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Women in the Civil Rights Movement

By Barrett Smith  
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*The Civil Rights Movement was a social movement in the United States that fought to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans. While we continue to recognize the leaders of this movement and those who contributed, the men of the movement are far more celebrated and remembered than the women. In this informational text, Barrett Smith discusses the role that women played in the Civil Rights Movement. As you read, take notes on how women contributed to the Civil Rights Movement and how others responded to their contributions.*

- [1] When most people think of the Civil Rights Movement and the people who led it, they think of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and other men. But in reality, women were very important participants in and organizers of the movement. Though women at the time were expected to take more of a background role, many women became leaders of organizations and protests. However, they are often forgotten in history. **Rosa Parks** is the most well-known woman in the Civil Rights Movement, but the way her story is told makes her seem like more of a symbol than the important leader that she really was.



*"Photograph of a Young Woman at the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C. with a Banner, August 28, 1963" by Jared Enos is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

Many people think Rosa Parks was just a tired seamstress who didn't feel like getting up on the bus one day, but in reality, she had been involved in planning and organizing against racism for years. The day she refused to get up on the bus was not the first time she had thought about resisting this way; in fact, she was influenced by Jo Ann Robinson, the head of the Women's Political Council who called for a bus boycott<sup>1</sup> after being verbally attacked by a white bus driver in 1949. After the actions of Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, women from many different organizations became the leading force that kept the boycott going. They arranged carpools and had bake sales to raise money for alternative transportation for those people who normally took the bus. When it became clear that the boycott was working and starting to have an influence, men took control and came to the forefront. At the first mass meeting after the boycott, the men in charge refused to let Rosa Parks speak. They said she had already done enough.

This is an example of the huge impact women had on the movement even though they remained in the background. Here are some other women who were important to the Civil Rights Movement:

1. **Boycott (verb):** to refuse to having dealings with a person or business as a protest

## Ella Baker

**Ella Baker** was one of the founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), two very important organizations in the Civil Rights Movement. She helped spread the movement and persuade women and young people to get involved. She also started a northern support group that raised money and supplies to help people in the South.

## Septima Clark

- [5] **Septima Clark** was an activist whose work laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement. She was a teacher who created a literacy program to teach African Americans to read and write. During this time, many states used literacy tests to prevent African American people — many of whom didn't know how to read and write — from voting.

## Viola Liuzzo

**Viola Liuzzo** was a high school dropout and mother of five who became involved in the Civil Rights Movement when she returned to school. She was shot at age 39 while transporting freedom marchers<sup>2</sup> in Alabama.

There were many more women who were key participants in the Civil Rights Movement. Women were the majority of members in many local chapters of civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Black Panther Party. They were also the majority at many grassroots<sup>3</sup> protests. Women organized these events, cooked and prepared for rallies, and then cleaned up afterwards before getting ready for the next one. As Mildred Bond Roxborough, a secretary of the NAACP said, “without women we wouldn't have an NAACP.”

However, in spite of the importance of women in the Civil Rights Movement, they had to deal with sexism<sup>4</sup> and discrimination within the movement. When they asked for a representative at the 1963 March on Washington, the men organizing the march denied their request. They were offered seats on the platform and told they already had the famous gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, as a representative. However, Jackson was not allowed to make a speech. Women were disappointed by being denied adequate representation, but they still supported the march because they knew it would have a huge impact on the country.

Black women were oppressed not only by racism but also by sexism. Even within the Civil Rights Movement, they were often denied positions of leadership, overshadowed by men, and sexually harassed. Women leaders had to fight for resources as the men usually had first pick. But when they tried to speak out against the sexism in the Civil Rights Movement, the men said that they were taking the focus away from what it was really about — racism. Because of this, women felt like they had to choose one battle to fight. At the time, many black women thought race was more important.

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2. people who marched to protest the government's restriction of and lack of support for civil rights  
3. ordinary people in a society or an organization, especially a political party  
4. the prejudice or discrimination against women, on the basis of sex

[10] The Black Power Movement<sup>5</sup> started in 1966 as a movement that called for black empowerment. As part of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement sought different ways to achieve and organize for equal rights and made involvement for women in the movement even harder. Before the Black Power Movement, organizations often made decisions by taking a vote and coming to a collective agreement, which made it easier for women to fill leadership positions. The leadership of the Black Power Movement was hierarchical,<sup>6</sup> and men were always in charge.

The discrimination that African American women — and many other women of color — faced in the Civil Rights Movement inspired many to join the feminist movements<sup>7</sup> that arose in the 1970s. However, these women did not allow discrimination to prevent them from being part of the fight for racial justice, seeking leadership positions, and struggling within the movement for equal treatment and acknowledgment.

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5. a social movement that called for the independent development of political and social institutions for black people and emphasized pride in black culture
  6. arranged in order of rank
  7. movements that sought to secure legal, economic, and social equality for women

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies a central idea of the text?
  - A. Black women had an immense impact on the success of the Civil Rights Movement but were frequently disrespected and went unacknowledged because of their gender.
  - B. While black women made significant contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, they were unable to participate to the extent that men did because of their responsibilities at home.
  - C. Black women were prevented from contributing to the Civil Rights Movement because men feared they would have to endure violence.
  - D. While black women believed that gender equality was more important than racial equality, men pressured them to take up the fight for racial equality.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "When it became clear that the boycott was working and starting to have an influence, men took control and came to the forefront." (Paragraph 2)
  - B. "Women organized these events, cooked and prepared for rallies, and then cleaned up afterwards before getting ready for the next one." (Paragraph 7)
  - C. "However, in spite of the importance of women in the Civil Rights Movement, they had to deal with sexism and discrimination within the movement." (Paragraph 8)
  - D. "But when they tried to speak out against the sexism in the Civil Rights Movement, the men said that they were taking the focus away from what it was really about — racism." (Paragraph 9)
  
3. PART A: How does the author's reference to Rosa Parks in paragraph 2 contribute to the overall text?
  - A. It shows how important the contributions of black women were to the Civil Rights Movement.
  - B. It provides an example of a black woman who was adequately recognized for her contributions.
  - C. It shows how black women were silenced and prevented from providing further aid to the movement because of their gender.
  - D. It gives an example of how women worked in the background of the Civil Rights Movement.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from paragraph 2 best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "The day she refused to get up on the bus was not the first time she had thought about resisting this way"
  - B. "After the actions of Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, women from many different organizations became the leading force that kept the boycott going."
  - C. "When it became clear that the boycott was working and starting to have an influence, men took control and came to the forefront."
  - D. "At the first mass meeting after the boycott, the men in charge refused to let Rosa Parks speak. They said she had already done enough."

5. How did the struggles of black women during the Civil Rights Movement compare to the struggles of black men?

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