

# The civil rights movement often overlooks its black women heroes

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*Coretta Scott King, an American civil rights campaigner and widow of Martin Luther King Jr., stands behind a podium covered in microphones at a rally for peace in Vietnam at Central Park in New York City, April 27, 1968. Photo from Hulton Archive/Getty Images*

On that historic August day in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. told us his dream.

We didn't get to hear what the women of the civil rights movement dreamed of, because none spoke at length during the program of the March on Washington.

Daisy Bates was a leader in the movement to end segregation in Arkansas and a guide for the nine students who integrated Little Rock's Central High in 1958. She gave a brief pledge on August 28, 1963, before the "Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom." This was an addition to the program meant to appease black women who felt their voices were being ignored and their contributions overlooked.

## **Women Were The Backbone Of The Civil Rights Movement**

The civil rights movement could not have happened without women. They were grassroots organizers, educators, strategists and writers. They built organizational infrastructure, developed legal arguments and mentored young activists. They fought ardently against the forces of racism, but they also battled another form of oppression: sexism.



Coretta Scott King (right?width=750&compression=85) at the Women's Strike for Peace in front of the United Nations in New York City, 1963. The march celebrated the second anniversary of the women's organization. Photo: Eddie Adam/AP.

“There were hundreds of unnamed women who participated in the movement,” said Barbara Reynolds, a journalist and minister whose recordings of King’s wife, Coretta Scott King, are the basis of the activist’s posthumous memoir, “My Life, My Love, My Legacy.” “It was not just a few leaders — it was women ... who really put their mark on history,” Reynolds said.

Many of these women were architects in their own right, yet they found themselves outside King’s inner circle.

“Dr. King was a chauvinist,” Reynolds said. Men like him “could not assert their manhood in the general society, because they would be killed if they stood up for anything,” so they asserted their masculinity in other ways within their own community.

### **An Effective Movement Needed To Be Inclusive**

The women of the civil rights and black liberation movements understood their fight for human rights needed to address the dual forces of racism and sexism. They understood that for the movement to be effective, it needed to include all kinds of people. Together, many women worked to build new political movements free of all forms of prejudice, from racism and sexism to classism and homophobia.

“The women around (King) ... had something more to say,” said Ericka Huggins, a former leader in the Black Panther Party, which she said also struggled with sexism. “They had something more to say about how the institutional, structural sexism, and misogyny in some ways, was in place.”

The courage of black female activists in confronting multiple forms of oppression influenced other protest movements. These included the feminist movement, the fight for gay rights and the protests of the Vietnam War.

Coretta Scott King, a leader in her own right, used her talent as a singer to raise awareness and funds for her husband’s movement and to advocate for human rights broadly. She was an earlier critic of the Vietnam War than her husband, and she persuaded him to speak out against it.

### **Ella Baker’s Unique Presence**



*Ella Baker, an official of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, speaks at the Jeannette Rankin news conference on January 3, 1968. To the right of Baker is actress Ruby Dee. Photo: Jack Harris/AP.*

Martin Luther King was the face of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), one of the most prominent African-American civil rights organizations of his time. However, it was the political shrewdness of lifelong activist Ella Baker that birthed the organization and set its agenda, historian Barbara Ransby wrote. Baker is viewed by some as the most influential woman in the civil rights movement.

“Baker operated in a political world that was, in many ways, not fully ready for her,” Ransby wrote. “She inserted herself into leadership situations where others thought she simply did not belong. Her unique presence pioneered the way for fuller participation by other women in political organizations, and it reshaped the positions within the movement that they would occupy.”

The Oscar-nominated film “Selma” focused on King’s legacy in the Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights marches in 1965. However, it was Diane Nash, barely a presence in the film, who was one of its major organizers. Nash, a co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, also helped to organize the campaign to integrate lunch counters in Nashville in 1960.

## **A March Of Their Own**

Even when history does remember women, it tends to treat them as fables rather than human beings. Take Rosa Parks, who has been stripped of dimension, immortalized as an accidental hero.

“Everyone seems to think she was a frail little woman who was tired — that woman whose feet hurt,” Reynolds said. The truth is that Parks was a lifelong activist for racial justice, and what she was tired of, Reynolds said, was “being put on the back of the bus.”

Dorothy Height, a major leader of her day who served as president of the National Council of Negro Women, stood on the platform with King during the March on Washington. Still, Height said many women were furious about their mistreatment during it.

To highlight solidarity with male leaders and bring attention to the distinct oppression women faced, Height, along with several other black female leaders, held a parallel march of their own. The women marched down Independence Avenue, while the men marched down Pennsylvania Avenue.

## **“We Can Leave No One Behind”**

Today, there’s a new generation of black female activists fighting for social justice. Three of them — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi — founded and lead Black Lives Matter.

Donna Brazile, a political strategist and former interim chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, said the nation should be ready for more of them.

“Black women are taking an active role in beginning what I call the next phase of the black political movement, which is to prepare for a century in which the minority citizens of today will become the majority citizens of tomorrow,” she said. “Black women are going to lead that way, but we’re not going to be alone. We’re going to bring as many people with us. Because in moving the country forward, we can leave no one behind.”