

# Kings sexism

[History](#), [African American](#)



Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X are seen as unprecedented heroes of the Civil Rights movement. They relentlessly campaigned for equality between blacks and whites. Through their powerful leadership and strategic rhetoric they became Messiah like figures and generated a huge following throughout the United States and the rest of the world. Although the rhetoric of Martin and Malcom had an enormous impact on the progress of the civil rights movement, we should not romanticize these men. Despite the positive change they brought to the civil rights movement each had their limitations, which came in the form of prejudices. Both Martin and Malcolm advocated for violence against whites and had sexist views on women. This essay will argue that although each mans prejudicial views changed over the course of their work, these changes were minor when compared to two earlier, prominent black advocates for women's rights, Freidrick Douglass and W. E. B Du Bois. Although Martin and Malcolm's accomplishments were great, it is important to remember that they were humans. Like all humans, they had their strengths and weaknesses. To focus on their weaknesses does not take away from their strengths, but on the contrary, allows us to view these men in a larger context as human beings, human beings who were fundamentally no different than ourselves. Seeing them as human beings we are encouraged to take up the cause of freedom where they left off, building on their strengths and avoiding their weaknesses. We today can remain faithful to the spirit of their leadership only if we are willing to explore their limitations to understand them better, and in turn realize the freedom for which they died. (Cone, 272-273) One of Martin and Malcolm's most glaring limitations were their views on women. They expected their wives, Coretta

and Betty, to stay at home and raise their children while they worked for the liberation of African-Americans. This sexism hindered greatly the achievement of freedom for which they fought. Both of them failed to see sexism as connected with, and just as evil as racism. Following the pattern of white religious bodies, the black church and the Nation of Islam provided religious justifications for the subordination of women. While both differed sharply from the views of white men when it came to race, they shared much of the typical American males view on women. Both believed that women's place was at home in the domestic sphere. (Cone, 274) Martin had an ambivalent view and attitude toward the role of women. He saw women as equal to men, he thought they were just as intelligent and just as capable. On the other hand he saw his own wife as a "homemaker and mother for his children". When discussing his impending marriage with Coretta Scott, Martin was very adamant that he would expect whoever he married to be at home waiting for him. "I want a wife to respect me as head of the family" he told her. "I am head of the family" (Reddick, 60) Martin's sexist views were not restricted to his family life. He brought his sexist views into the political sphere as well. Sexism can be seen in much of his rhetoric but it is frequently overlooked as defeating racism and discrimination against black males was always his main focus. One of Martin's primary concerns was putting the black man on his feet with a job and a status. How can a black man be a real man, "wear the pants" and control his wife and children if he does not have a job to support them. Authority, according to Martin's logic, is derived from prestige and support. "When you deprive a man of his job" Martin told a European audience in 1965 "you deprive him of his

manhood... the authority of his fatherhood" (Cone, 277). Martin's sexism had an impact on his family life and political rhetoric, and also had an impact on who he allowed to work with him in the civil rights organization known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Although Ella Baker was one of the persons who first conceived of an idea like the SCLC she was never given due credit by Martin and his colleagues. Although she served as acting director most male preachers were uneasy with her presence because she did not demonstrate the "right attitude" (read "submissiveness"?) which they expected from women. Baker's tenure with the SCLC was brief, largely because of her conflicts with King and others regarding their views on women and leadership style, which focused exclusively around Martin Luther King Jr. (Cone, 278). A similar but much more rigid perspective on the role of women was held by Malcolm X. His view was shaped by the teachings of the Nation of Islam and his experience in Harlem ghettos. Explaining why he remained single for many years Malcolm claimed "[I had] too much experience that women were only tricky, deceitful, untrustworthy flesh. I had seen too many other men ruined or at least tied down, or in some other way messed up by women." (Malcolm, 226). Like preachers in Christian churches Malcolm also claimed to have derived his view on women from the bible. "Since the time of Adam and Eve in the garden" he said "women has led men into evil and the one she was created to serve became her slave". (Ibid). Malcolm's sexism was more obvious than Martin's because Martin did not often speak on the theme of women. When he did he was sure to frame his views in the acceptable public discourse of his time. Contrastingly, whatever views Malcolm held on any subject, he presented in the most extreme form

possible so no one would be in doubt on where he stood on the subject. Malcolm's views on women were his most extreme. In 1956 at the Philadelphia Temple, Malcolm gave a series of addresses on black women, accusing them of being "The greatest tool of the devil." "How do you think black men got in this state?" he asked his audience. "By our women tricking him and tempting him, and the devil taught her how to do this." He even goes as far as to put black women on the same level as white men. "the trickiest in existence is the black woman and the white man" "if you go to court with your wife she will always win over you because the devil can use her to break down more of our black brothers... it is this evil black women in North America who does not want to do right and holds the black man back from saving himself". At this point in his address he noticed a visiting woman walking out on him. "Look at the sister who just got up and walked out... [her] hair five different shades. She's living in a perilous time to imitate the devil woman and when she hears a warning, instead of listening... she walks out angry." (Cone, 275) Malcolm was unarguably an extremist, especially in regards to his views on women. When he discovered an error about something he was as extreme in his rejection of it as he had been in his affirmation. Following his split with the Nation of Islam an apparent change began to occur regarding Malcolm's views on the role women. During trips to Africa and the Middle East he made an about-face regarding his views on women's rights. Although Malcolm's change in views is a positive one, it must be argued that this change was brought about due to a selfish motive. He began to consider the issue of women's rights not from a religious or moral standpoint, but from the standpoint of mobilizing the forces he would

need to revolutionize society. Martin stated that he had "became convinced during these travels in the importance of giving freedom to women, giving her education and giving her the incentive to get out there and put that same spirit and understanding in their children". (Malcolm, 179). With this in mind it is more difficult to see Malcolm's change in attitude as an authentic one. It was merely a shift in rhetoric to help advance his cause. Martin was more open to change in the later years of his life. Bibliography Malcolm X, the Autobiography of Malcolm X, with Alex Haley. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973). Malcolm X, "Paris Interview" By Any Means Necessary, ed. George Breitman. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).