

# The historiography of womens role and visibility in the civil rights movement res...

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



The social and political changes taken in the course of the Civil Rights Movement were accomplished through dramatic action and powerful organization, using grassroots initiatives and the participation of women in the leadership process (though only at an intermediate level). Women slowly became an increasingly important demographic in the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. Women chiefly occupied an intermediate leadership role, providing moderate leadership in many local and regional cells of civil rights organizations. These intermediate layers of local leadership became vital to the Civil Rights Movement, as the inclusion of women in the groups also provided needed gender equality and solidarity. This decision also provided a larger base of activists, increasing mobilization of civil rights efforts throughout America in the 1950s. The ongoing threat of the Soviet Union, and its increasing leftist access to Congress and legislatures can also be credited with some successes of the movement, as antifascism and anticolonialism made the race issue an international one. There has been an increasing and substantial base of literature published on the subject of women's role and visibility in the Civil Rights Movement, and they each provide a unique and interesting perspective on the subject at hand.

In Lynne Olson's book *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830-1970*, a comprehensive account of the "true story" of the civil rights movement is provided. In essence, her thesis is that the hard work that many women put into the Civil Rights Movement and its advances is often diminished in importance, thereby marginalizing them even in this relatively progressive time. For example, Olson writes about the role women has in the August 1963 March on Washington:

“ In later years, the march would be remembered as the most glorious moment of the civil rights struggle, the culmination of years of blood-shed, arduous work, and incredible hardship. Yet on that red-letter day, women, who had played such vital roles in launching the modern movement and propelling it forward, were thrust into the background. No woman marched down Constitution Avenue with Martin Luther King Jr., and the rest of the civil rights leaders. No woman went to the White House afterward to meet with President John F. Kennedy.”

The strengths of Olson’s work is evident; the research is well performed and comprehensive, chronologically organized and full of intensely personal stories that provide an emotional core to the book. The book is must more journalistic than historical, framing the struggle more in terms of these stories than of an overall history, so one weakness includes the book’s assumption of a basic knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement.

Chana Kai Lee, in her book *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, explores the life and contributions of Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1997), an iconic and symbolic figure in the civil rights movement. Lee’s thesis is that Hamer’s life is much more complex than the simplistic portrayal of a strong black woman overcoming all odds that is often painted of her; Hamer’s story does not include “ complete triumph over all odds or complete victimization,” but rather a nuanced struggle that brought about “ enormous personal pain, disappointment, and exhaustion”. Lee’s strengths as an author extend primarily to her seamless mix of history and biography, allowing Hamer’s personal life and history to influence her politics and her radicalism – for example, the “ direct link between race and access to

resources" led to Hamer's economic hardships that pushed her into activism". If there are any weaknesses to the book, it is that its emphasis on a single figure overshadows its status as a book on the Civil Rights Movement; however, as Hamer's struggle is one that many women experienced at the time, it remains a valuable and unsentimental resource for this particular subject.

Lee's work focuses particularly on Hamer's work with the SNCC and the Black Power movement; as someone who " appeared to be in transition to full scale anti-poverty work," Hamer became heavily involved in the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU), whose focus on self-determination anticipated the Black Power movement's sense of black nationalism. At the same time, Hamer started to distance herself from the SNCC, the parent organization of the MFDP and MFLU, because of its increased radicalism and focus on greater national control, choosing instead to focus on education and welfare. To that end, Lee argues that Hamer made the right choice by focusing on practical matters that would help blacks on the local level. Mary Dudziak, in her book *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America, explores the fight to restore civil rights in the wake of the Cold War and shaky international relations. In essence, Dudziak's thesis is that the pressures of the Cold War played a significant part in convincing American governmental leaders (including Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Truman) to increase their support of civil rights reforms. Because the Soviet Union would constantly use the United States' poor civil rights record in their own international propaganda, the United States chose to retaliate by

diminishing the negative coverage through increase in this support for civil rights. According to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, international perceptions of America being racially unequal was affecting international relations:

“[T]he existence of discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries. We are reminded over and over by some foreign newspapers and spokesmen, that our treatment of various minorities leaves much to be desired We will have better international relations when those reasons for suspicion and resentment have been removed.”

Dudziak’s research is impeccable, providing insight into the numerous tactics that the United States government attempted in order to improve their international perception of race relations, including Kennedy’s civil rights policies and the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which had dramatically positive effects on international public opinion of America. Dudziak also delves into the way this treatment of race failed to improve international relations, mostly from those who believed that true economic equality cannot come from a capitalist society. In short, however, Dudziak provides an excellent contribution to civil rights historiography.

Despite this, Dudziak’s perspective on the Cold War’s relationship with Civil Rights is quite controversial; his argument that the Cold War was good for civil rights because it forced white leaders to soften their perspectives threatens to feel hollow. Furthermore, it essentially proposes that black leaders were not responsible for securing civil rights, but instead it was bestowed upon them by white leaders out of charity and to make themselves

look good. This is a tremendously cynical and controversial outlook on the work of civil rights leaders, and can make it seem as though the victory was not won by those who fought it, but by the grace of those who bowed to political pressure.

In Mark Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa*, the author provides an autobiography of their childhood during apartheid, and his attempts to escape from it. The primary thesis of the book, as told through Mathabane's experiences, is that embracing education and gaining a skill set allowed him to escape the destitution that he was experiencing in apartheid South Africa and become someone significant and important. The strengths of the book come primarily from the author's honesty and forthrightness with which he writes his experiences; the audience is able to see firsthand the horrors of apartheid, particularly the abject poverty blacks were exposed to in South Africa, and the stereotypes and racism that blacks had to experience. However, some weaknesses in the book revolve around the book's lack of strict applicability to the American Civil Rights Movement, especially in its effects on women (as this book is written from the perspective of a child suffering through apartheid). However, this also provides an interesting context with which to view the problems and potential solutions of American racial inequality through viewing another country's struggles with it.

Teresa Nance, in her article "Hearing the Missing Voice," further discusses the problems women had during the Civil Rights Movement. Nance's thesis is that the Civil Rights Movement experienced a pressing and prevalent phenomenon wherein women were in charge of some of the more

unglamorous duties involved with the movement, while the men enjoyed the visibility and status that allowed them to maintain power and develop leadership skills. To that end, women were unable to capitalize on the social and cultural opportunities of the Civil Rights Movement, failing to move up in the ranks while other men were able to quickly advance their importance and political clout. Nance believes that women were the “missing voice” in the Civil Rights Movement, constantly overshadowed by the political opportunism of the men in the movement, leaving them practically invisible when it comes to recognition and historical remembrance. Nance’s article is well-written and well-researched, with many examples of marginalized black women and figures in the movement, providing a strong contribution to the historiography of this subject.

Along with the work of Lee and Olson, Nance’s scholarship challenges the traditional narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, Nance notes that “When thinking of the civil rights movement, the name that most often comes to mind is that of the charismatic leader, Martin Luther King Jr.,” and less often of the many other important woman figures in the movement including Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, Ella Baker and others. Lee’s approach is to focus on a single black woman who was perceived to be important in the movement (Hamer), and to note the difficulties that she had to experience in her work during that time. Olson also takes a chronological and biological approach to this subject, noting the long tradition of black women being involved in politics to make these issues even more objectionable. All three of these authors argue that women’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement was extremely marginalized and downplayed, with women being

relegated to menial tasks and comparatively mid-level responsibilities. This left women somewhat invisible and underrepresented in the larger decisions related to the Civil Rights Movement, which is what left many women still looking for equality even after the movement's perceived end.

Manfred Berg, in his article "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War," argues that "anticommunist hysteria. . . put tremendous pressure on the civil rights movement. As a consequence, unity was destroyed and its radical left wing fell victim to the witch-hunts of the red scare". In essence, Berg's thesis is that the Cold War was actually somewhat harmful to the Black Civil Rights movement, which is directly opposed to Dudziak's perspective that the Cold War helped bring about greater support from the government. While the early Cold War brought about the Red Scare, wherein leftists and communists were blacklisted and persecuted in many ways, the Civil Rights Movement essentially had to eschew those elements from their ranks in order to survive and gain momentum. Because some elements of the movement did not want to associate with more radicalized leftist elements (which might have gotten them in greater trouble with the government), the movement itself did not gain the sense of unity that it could have. These elements included the CPUSA, which had a certain inconsistency in its support of civil rights, leaving the much more moderate NAACP to act as the primary organization spearheading the Civil Rights Movement. By noting the role that the Cold War played in the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement, Berg notes that the Civil Rights Movement was not one unified group vying for rights, and that there was infighting even in those organizations fighting for progress.



The historical research performed is comprehensive, and Berg's writing is compelling; this provides another strong entry in the historiography of the struggles within the Civil Rights Movement.

George Fredrickson, in his article "Resistance to White Supremacy in the US and South Africa," compares and contrasts the activities taken by groups in both nations to the rise of white supremacy. In essence, his thesis is that, while both movements started in very similar ways, the American movement had the greater chance to succeed due to forceful figureheads, emotional and church-based appeals hinging on religious belief, and the support of the federal government. On the other hand, South Africa suffered from a lack of all of these things, as Britain had recently ceded its power by the time its rights movement started; they also lacked the international support America had due to its communist involvement. While South Africa eventually succeeded in its Civil Rights Movement, it had to resort to violence to do so, whereas America managed to successfully stage a non-violent revolution for civil rights. Frederickson's comparisons of both movements are strong and well-argued, though some correlations are made without strict causation (the success or failure of South Africa's movements being tied to America's successes, etc.).

Comparing Fredrickson's work to Mathabane's accounts of his childhood in South Africa, there can be some small value in comparing the civil rights approaches of America and South Africa. For one, Mathabane's own struggles in South Africa echo black children's struggles in America to be granted agency and civil rights; while the abject poverty and destitution was not as widespread in America as it was there, Mathabane's use of education

to uplift himself is also an interesting perspective on which to frame a solution for American civil rights issues. Fredrickson's work, directly comparing both civil rights movements, provides an even more acute acknowledgement of these countries' differences, however - in short, the fundamental differences in ideology, economic and political status between the two nations means that the two nations could likely not share similar solutions.

Despite the hard work of those who fought hard to make civil rights a possibility, the movement itself is considered a balm in retrospect - there is significant backlash that occurs against further racism due to the fact that the Movement happened. Though it is generally agreed that it made significant progress in civil rights, the fact of its existence is used to downplay contemporary discriminatory practices, as racism " was limited to the South" and is not considered to happen anywhere else. In spite of these efforts, " the success of the movement depended not just on idealism and courage, but on a keen understanding and ready use of the fulcrums of power," which came into play heavily in the aforementioned civil rights bills and anti-discrimination laws, which finally saw some significant progress in the 1950s.

In conclusion, the existing literature and historiography related to various issues in the Civil Rights Movement provide a variety of well-researched perspectives that shed light on the various social and political issues that were prevalent during that era. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, reeling from deeply-entrenched discrimination and dehumanizing, found substantial progress in the face of changing politics and organization

tactics. In the 1950s, legislation and changing attitudes, stemming in part from the Cold War's influence on Americans, led to anti-discrimination legislation finally being pushed through Congress. Increasing mobilization and gender equality in the organization of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole played a significant factor, as women played an important part in its mid-level leadership. However, they also found themselves becoming increasingly invisible in their own movement, as the advancement of male-centric organizations and leaders left women in the background of this ostensibly progressive social event. Other intersections of the problems of the Black Power Movement, the Cold War and similarities to apartheid-era South Africa provide fodder for a wealth of scholarship on the subject as well.

## **Works Cited**

Berg, Manfred. "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War." *Journal of American History* 94. 1 (June 2007): 75-96.

Dudziak, Mary. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. (2000).

Fredrickson, George. "Resistance to White Supremacy in the U. S. and South Africa." In Brian

Ward and Tony Badger, eds., *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (1996).

Hall, J. D. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 4 (Vol. 91, Mar. 2005): 1233-1263.

Lee, Chana Kai. *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. (2000).

Mathabane, Mark. *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa*. (1986).

<https://assignbuster.com/the-historiography-of-womens-role-and-visibility-in-the-civil-rights-movement-research-paper-example/>

Nance, Teresa A. "Hearing the Missing Voice." *Journal of Black Studies* 26. 5 (May 1996): pp. 543-559.

Olson, Lynne. *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830-1970*. (2001).

Robnett, B. *African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership and Micromobilization*. *American Journal of Sociology* 6 (Vol. 101, May 1996): 1661-1693.

William S. White. "Civil Rights Survives Gettysburg - Now For Appomattox." *The New York Times* June 23, 1957. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009).

William S. White. "Move to Weaken Civil Rights Bill Splits Coalition." *The New York Times* July 18, 1957. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009).