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Hannah Curran,
Seton Hall University

History of the Civil Rights Movement

Abstract. Fannie Lou Hamer was a civil rights leader, promoting voting rights for African Americans. She additionally was heavily involved in promoting the need for women's rights. Her involvements include working with the Student Non Violence Committee as well as being a founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Black women during the civil rights movement were often hidden from the historical narrative. However, many of these women were also the ones leading a sum of the successes the civil rights movement experienced. Women being silenced from the conversation remains to be a trend throughout history. This, being the case for individuals like Fannie Lou Hamer, who showed not only personal resilience but a drive that led her to be a powerful force in the fight for civil rights. Known for her ability to add sonic techniques to persuade, Hamer was heavily involved in pushing for voting rights for African Americans¹. Being the daughter of a sharecropper living in Mississippi, and being the descendant of slaves, Hamer had odds stacked against her. Yet, she still successfully made a name for herself, especially with organizations like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party².

Sharecropping was a dehumanizing system that forced African Americans to be forced into racist system because of the economic discrimination it imposed. As explained in the text, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, "despite the abolition of slavery, the plantation remained the basic unit of production, the landlord maintained strict control over the labor process and work schedule"³. Although slavery was abolished, sharecropping remained one of the ways that white southern maintained control and were able to keep a divide between the races. For individuals like Fannie Lou Hamer, sharecropping was the only way she could survive. Hamer's family was said to have "worked like animals" in the sharecropping system in attempts to providing for all twenty-two family members⁴. Due to the economic disparities between the two races in the south, and the lack of opportunity available for African Americans in the South, many families, like Hamer's, had to work hard, labor intensive jobs.

Hamer however, being the resilient figure that she was, even at a young age, was excited to be able to support her family even if it meant taking part in a system that was designed to work against them. According to the *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*:

When Hamer was six years old, she was offered a reward of canned fish and Cracker Jacks candy from the sharecropper boss if she proved how well she could pick cotton. Excited, she passed the test and ended up joining her siblings and working in the fields twelve to fourteen hours a day."

¹ Cox, Julia. "Never a Wasted Hum: The Freedom Singing of Fannie Lou Hamer".

² Mann, B. S. 2020. Fannie Lou Hamer.

³ Royce, Edward. "Southern Sharecropping and the Constriction of Possibilities." In *the Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, p.1-24.

⁴Bracey, Earnest N. 2011. *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of a Civil Rights Icon*. p.19.

At the age of six, Hamer found herself being forced to support her family due to the economic disadvantages set up in the South based on race. By taking part in the sharecropping system, Hamer's family was able to gain some economic freedom. Eventually, they would be able to rent a home on their own, this giving her family some independence and success as an African American family in the South⁵.

Yet, while have some success, white Southerners found themselves threatened by this success. As shared earlier, at twelve years old Hamer was seeing some success. Her family had saved up enough "to rent some land and buy mules and a cultivator, thus moving a step of the economic ladder from sharecropping" the texts continues by sharing the family also purchased a car and began putting money into the home they rented⁶. Yet, this success intimidated white southerners. Racism was still deeply rooted in the South, causing many white southern to act violently against black individual's success. Hamer spoke about this experience, reported in *The Nation*:

"Then our stock got poisoned. We knowed this white man had done it. He stirred up a gallon of Paris green with the feed. When we got out there, one mule was already dead. T'other two mules and the cow had their stomachs all swelled up. It was too late to save 'em. That poisonin' knocked us right back down flat. We never did get back up again. The white man did it just because we were getting' somewhere. White people never like to see Negroes get a little success. All of this is no secret in the state of Mississippi"⁷.

Hamer and her family got a glimpse of success that was instantly shut down by white fragility. The discrimination that Hamer and her family faced however, is only a small glimpse of one of the many ways white supremacy triumphed in the South. This incident forced Hamer's family back into sharecropping.

The influence of this incident also had several other implications. Hamer received an education up until the point that her family needed her to work in the fields. She gained the ability to read and spell but only after she tended to picking cotton. This was a set back for Fannie Lou Hamer, who was a remarkably good student. However, as shared in *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of a Civil Rights Icon*, despite only having a "limited, sixth-grade education... Hamer showed remarkable poise in front of sophisticated and educated people from all walks of life"⁸. This success would be shown in great significance during the civil rights movement. Through her experiences, Hamer became an advocate for civil rights, specifically voting rights.

In 1962, Hamer was introduced to black suffrage, she was told that she did have the right to register and vote. This was more than a chance to go against the sharecropping system for Hamer, now she was able to really have say in Mississippi and across the nation. After learning about her rights, Hamer was one of the first to volunteer to go to the county courthouse to register to vote amongst 18 others. Later that week, on Friday, August 31st, Hamer went to the Indianola courthouse. With all intentions to register she was quickly informed that she would need to pass a literacy test before⁹. Literacy tests were designed with the intentions of making sure that those taking them could not pass.

⁵ Fax, E. 1970. *Contemporary Black leaders*. p.117.

⁶ Chris Myers Asch. 2011. *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer*. p.55.

⁷ "Tired of Being Sick and Tired" by Jerry Demuth," *Hankey Center & C. Elizabeth Boyd '33 Archives*.

⁸ Bracy, Earnest N. 2011. *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of a Civil rights Icon*.

⁹ Brooks, Maegan Parker. *A Voice That Could Stir an Army : Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement*".

They were a racist tactic to prevent black voters from getting into the polls. These tests, specifically in Mississippi required test takers to “transcribe and interpret a section of the state constitution and write an essay on the responsibilities of citizenship”¹⁰. The same challenges would be put in place for Hamer’s test.

However, the day was not over for Hamer after failing the literacy test. Harassment and intimidation would follow Hamer and other African Americans who “exerted their constitutional rights in the state of Mississippi.” On the bus ride home, they would be pulled over for being “to yellow.” Hamer would go on to later share these experiences to the DNC in 1964 to the Credentials Committee. She shared in this speech how she was expected to withdrawal her registration since “[there were] not ready for that in Mississippi” meaning they were not ready for blacks to have the same rights as white citizens¹¹.

Mississippi did not try to hide that they were not ready for blacks to vote. When attempting to register to vote Hamer recounted on how they asked her for her employer. She listed the name of the white plantation owner who she worked for, she knew she would return home to find out she had been fired, which was exactly the case. As shared in *A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Back-Freedom Movement*:

“The fact that [the plantation owner] knew about Hamer’s registration effort even before she returned to his plantation suggests that he received a phone call from the registration office. The phone call, in turn, conveys just threatened white Mississippians were by the prospect of black voters, how organized they were in response to the challenge, and how white supremacy bound the freedom of even its supposed beneficiaries- [the plantation owner] had little choice in the matter of firing one of his best employees”¹².

The ultimatum of having to choose between constitutional right and employment in both situations had fatal consequences. This harsh reality motivated many African Americans, like Fannie Lou Hamer to spread their voice through involvement with organizations to promote the need for civil rights for all.

Hamer’s influence and ability to speak for what she believed in caught the attention of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. After being forced out of her home due to white men shooting at it, she became more motivated to get involved with the movement. As a result, the SNCC chapter in Nashville Tennessee was heavily impressed by Hamer’s auditory skills and invited her to speak at one of their meetings. Meeting attendees “paid careful attention to her arguments and were swayed by her charisma”¹³.

This charisma would land Hamer a position with the SNCC in 1963¹⁴. As a SNCC field secretary Hamer had the ability to not only travel the country speaking and urging others to back the civil rights movements but also register others to vote¹⁵. For instance, in 1964, Hamer alongside others was part of the SNCC delegation that accepted an invitation to meet with the government of Guinea¹⁶. Through

¹⁰ "Literacy Tests" 2020. *National Museum of American History*.

¹¹ Hamer, Fannie Lou. "Testimony Before the Credentials Committee, Democratic National Convention"

¹² Brooks, Maegan Parker. *A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement*.

¹³ "Fannie Lou Hamer". 2020. *SNCC Digital Gateway*.

¹⁴ Mills, Kay. 2017. "Fannie Lou Hamer: Civil Rights Activist". *Mississippi History Now*.

¹⁵ "Fannie Lou Hamer". 2020. *SNCC 1960-1966: Six Years of The Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee*.

¹⁶ Carson, Clayborne. 1987. *The Eyes on The Prize Civil Rights Reader*. New York: Penguin Books.

this position Hamer attended various conferences and opportunities to ensure she was promoting civil rights and connecting with others involved in the movement. Hamer would additionally during this time gain her own right to vote in January of 1963¹⁷.

While in this position, in June of 1963, Hamer “attended a citizenship training school sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Charleston, South Carolina, to learn how to teach her neighbors about the benefits of citizenship.” She, however, would run into trouble on the ride home from this training. On her bus ride home, stopping in Winona, Mississippi during a pit stop, a few people on the bus would run into a café. This café would refuse to serve them. As reported by Annelle Ponder, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “A highway patrolman came from the rear of the café and tapped some of the group on the shoulder with his billy club, saying, ‘Y’all get out - get out.’” Ponder would go on to “reminded him it was against the law to refuse them service but he said, ‘Ain’t no damn law, you just get out of here!’”¹⁸. This instance showed once again the hostility and violence black individuals met in the South. Although was prevent situations like this from happening, clearly it did not.

While Ponder began to take note of the officer’s information, Hamer stepped off the bus to see what was going on. While questioning if the group should continue their travels, Hamer would also get arrested. The arrest made on June 9th, 1963, according to Winona Police Chief Thomas Herrod were due to the individuals sitting in white sections of the café and bus. However, while arrested these individuals would face police brutality and horrific accounts of violence. For instance, reports share “At the county jail, white jailers forced two African American Prisoners to savagely beat Ms. Hamer with loaded Blackjacks and she was nearly killed. As she regained consciousness, she overheard one of the white officers propose, ‘We could put them SOB’s in [the] Big Black [River] and nobody would ever find them.’” This would go on to have permanent impacts on Hamer’s health. She would suffer from lost vision in one eye as well as kidney damage that directly contributed to her death at the age of 59¹⁹.

Hamer on top of her voting advocacy became vocal on issues sexual and racial injustice. She would state, “A black women’s body was never hers alone.” For Hamer, her experiences with police brutality would not be her first experience with physical abuses as a black woman. She remembers growing up “her mother packing a nine-millimeter Luger into their covered lunch bucket, just incase a white man decided to attack her children in the cotton field”²⁰.

Yet, despite experiencing this brutality, Hamer would continue to advocate; not letting violence discourage her. As the presidential election of 1964 neared and young people of all backgrounds came to Mississippi to encourage equal voting rights during “Freedom Summer” of 1964, Hamer would go on to create Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. This organization would be created with hopes of “challenging the all-white delegation that would be selected to represent the state at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey”²¹. Hamer in her 1967 autobiography discussed the party:

“In 1964 we registered 63,000 black people from Mississippi into the Freedom Democratic Party. We formed our own party because the whites wouldn’t even let us register. We decided

¹⁷ Mann, Barry Stewart. 2020. “Fannie Lou Hamer”.

¹⁸ Mills, Kay. 2017. “Fannie Lou Hamer: Civil Rights Activist”.

¹⁹ “Remembering.1963: Fannie Lou Hamer Arrested and Beaten in Winona, Mississippi”. 2018. *Equal Justice Initiative*.

²⁰ McGuire, Danielle. 2010. *At the Dark End of The Street: Black Women, Rape, And Resistance – A New History of The Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to The Rise of Black Power*. New York: Vintage Books.

²¹ Mills, Kay. 2017. “Fannie Lou Hamer: Civil Rights Activist”.

to challenge the white Mississippi Democratic Party at the National Convention. We followed all the laws that the white people themselves made. We tried to attend the precinct meetings and they locked the doors on us or moved the meetings and that's against the laws they made for their own selves... But we learned the hard way that even though we had all the laws and all the righteousness on our side- that white man is not going to give up his power to us. We had to build our own power. We have to win every single political office we can, where we have a majority of black people"²².

Hamer would continue to speak often on the organization's behalf, most notably when she entered the convention singing *This Little Light of Mine*.

However, after testifying in Atlantic City and challenging the Democratic party by providing an "emotional testimony [that] challenged the Democratic Party's commitment to civil rights in front of a national audience," President Johnson received a push to offer the MFDP two-at-large seats at the convention. Hamer would argue that they "didn't come all this way for no two seats," refusing the two seats. Hamer would continue to have success with the MFDP after running for congress and then in 1968, representing the state of Mississippi as their delegate at the national convention.

Although black women are often hidden from the historical narrative, Fannie Lou Hamer's efforts continue to inspire many civil rights advocates today. After not shying away from sharing the details of her beating at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in 1964, Hamer shared she would continue to tell her story "until the day she died," "offering up her testimony as a form of resistance to the sexual and racial injustice of segregation"²³. Through her personal resilience as well as nationwide efforts, such as her work with the SNCC and the MFDP, Hamer was able to push for voting opportunities and other human rights. Hamer died at the age of 59 on March 14th, 1977, her life was one filled with accomplishment. Notably, Hamer's gravestone reads "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired"²⁴. The efforts of Fannie Lou Hamer continue to move forward through civil rights advocates across the globe.

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²² Carson, Clayborne. 1987. *The Eyes on The Prize Civil Rights Reader*. New York: Penguin Books.

²³ McGuire, Danielle. 2010. *At the Dark End of The Street: Black Women, Rape, And Resistance – A New History of The Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to The Rise of Black Power*. New York: Vintage Books.

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