

Standing Up for Change: African American Women and the Civil Rights Experience



As far back as the 19th century, African American women fought for rights. They resisted slavery. They spoke out against racism. They established women's clubs to improve conditions for African Americans. They worked in politics and journalism, organized black labor, and supported education. In the 20th century, they formed the backbone of the modern Civil Rights Movement. African American women were the critical mass, the grassroots leaders challenging America to embrace justice and equality for all.



Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was an icon in the fight against slavery. Born into slavery, Tubman was afraid in 1849 she would be sold so she ran away. Over the next 15 years she worked as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, making several trips into slave-holding states and leading dozens of individuals to freedom. Some reports suggest she helped more than 300 slaves escape. During the Civil War, she further risked her life and safety to work as a nurse and then a spy for the Union Army. Afterwards, she became an outspoken advocate for African American and women's rights, insisting that all be treated with respect and granted equality.

Sojourner Truth

Born into slavery, Sojourner Truth spoke out for abolition and civil rights. At the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, Truth challenged prevailing notions of racial and gender inferiority declaring, "Ain't I a woman?" In her speech, Truth focused on the idea that, despite her race, she too was a woman and deserved to be treated as one. Truth also recruited African American troops for the Union Army during the Civil War and worked to secure land grants from the federal government for freed slaves.





Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Ida B. Wells-Barnett challenged discrimination and sexism, exposed injustice, and fought for equality. Born into slavery in 1862, Wells-Barnett grew up in Mississippi. After the death of her parents when she was 16, she became a teacher. Despite having a ticket, Wells-Barnett was thrown off a first-class train; so she turned to writing to point out injustices. She wrote scathing articles decrying the scourge of lynching. Her expose about an 1892 lynching enraged locals who burned her press and drove her from Memphis. She relocated to Chicago and became very active in the suffrage movement.

Mary Church Terrell

Activist Mary Eliza Church Terrell ardently supported both woman's suffrage and African American rights. She developed a strategy for African American women to become full citizens of the United States. While serving as president of the National Association of Colored Women, she campaigned tirelessly among black organizations and mainstream white organizations to achieve black woman's suffrage. After the passage of the 19th Amendment, Terrell continued to fight for civil rights. Her efforts helped ban discrimination in public places in Washington, DC.





Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks' simple act of defiance in 1955 transformed the nation and earned her the title, "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement." As a member of the NAACP, Parks had been active in the Civil Rights Movement long before she refused to give up her seat. Her arrest triggered a 381-day boycott of the Montgomery bus system, organized by a little-known Baptist minister, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1999, she was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor. After Parks' death, in 2005, her body lay in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, the first woman in history to be so honored by an act of Congress.

Ruby Bridges

Ruby Bridges was the only African American to attend her school. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1954, the year Bridges was born, that all schools must desegregate. Six African American students lived in the William Frantz Elementary School district in New Orleans and were given the option to change schools. The other five decided not to do so. On November 14, 1960 Bridges started first grade as the only African American student in her school. While Bridges' parents were concerned for her safety, they wanted her to receive the best education possible.





Ruby Hurley

Ruby Hurley was on the front lines of the modern Civil Rights Movement as an executive in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Hurley became the NAACP's National Youth Secretary in 1943. Over the next decade she organized youth councils and college chapters, building a base of 25,000 youth members. NAACP Youth Council members launched the 1960s sit-in movement, proving the value of the foundation Hurley laid down. Hurley was promoted to regional director in 1952 and engaged in each major event of the Civil Rights Movement. She was the rare woman to hold a senior leadership position in a national civil rights organization.

Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer worked to secure social, economic, and political rights for African Americans. She entered the Civil Rights Movement after attending a meeting encouraging African Americans to register to vote. Hamer was arrested and beaten for her work. In 1964, she co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and spoke at the Democratic National Convention, where she called for mandatory integrated state delegations. Hamer continually worked to put the plight of African Americans in the public eye.





Mary McLeod Bethune

Revolutionary educator Mary McLeod Bethune not only provided her students with an academic education, but also an education in the classroom of life. She founded the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls in Daytona Beach, Florida in 1904. The school flourished, eventually becoming Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune also served as president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACW) and, in 1935, founded the National Council of Negro Women. She also worked with the White House and assisted four different presidents, including serving on the Black Cabinet and as Director of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration.

Dr. Dorothy Height

Dr. Dorothy Irene Height dedicated her life to actualizing the vision of a socially and politically equitable United States. She served as president of the National Council of Negro Women from 1957 to 1997, becoming the most influential woman within the Civil Rights Movement's leadership. She also served on the staff of the National Board of the YWCA of the USA for more than 30 years. Height was instrumental in fighting for school desegregation, voting rights, employment opportunities, and public accommodations.



From the nation's beginning, African American women added an intellectually diverse landscape of ideas to the solution for racism and oppression. They have had to overcome the double bind of racism and sexism, which marginalized them within both women's and civil rights movements. Yet, they persevered to provide rich, vibrant voices to the chorus of American freedom, justice, and independence.



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