SNCC Women and the Stirrings of Feminism

One of the most contentious historical arguments over SNCC has been the role of women in the organization and SNCC's impact on the feminist movement. Some have argued that it was sexism in SNCC that made many (mostly white) female activists question the role of patriarchy—if SNCC challenged oppression based on race, these women began to recognize their own oppression based on sex. As evidence, these scholars cite a position paper prepared by Mary King and Casey Hayden for SNCC's Waveland conference in November of 1964, called to reconsider the organization's direction. At the time, the paper was generally derided as off the subject. Many observers and participants, however, including King and Hayden themselves, have insisted that SNCC was more progressive than the rest of society on questions of gender roles, and that it was the empowering nature of SNCC's style and structure that enabled these strong women to ask the same questions and employ the same strategies in the feminist movement that they had learned in the civil rights struggle.

MARY KING: SNCC was important. We could get to see any member of Congress that we wanted to see, any senator. We had former CIA directors flying in to meet with us. The eyes of the world, in a sense, were on us through the television media. We, being the big, big we, all of the thousands of people, the armies of unnamed people involved in the movement, had made it irrevocable for the 1964 Civil Rights Act to be passed, and the deaths of our three

fellow workers had in large part focused the legislators on that point so there was no return to the status that existed before.

But we also were not sure of ourselves as an organization; we did not know exactly in which direction we were going to move. And as we pondered all of the possibilities that were open to us, the call went out from Jim and a committee in Atlanta inviting all of the staff flung across the South, from Arkansas to the Eastern Shore, to a staff meeting to take place in Waveland, Mississippi, in November 1964. And each of us was invited to prepare a position paper on anything we wanted to write about. In SNCC's radical egalitarian tradition, we could say anything we wanted to say, write about any topic, challenge the staff to anything we wanted to challenge them to. And these position papers were gathered and mimeographed in Atlanta and sent out. There were, as I recall, thirty-seven position papers as we convened for the staff retreat. These papers were not to be the central defining question on the agenda, but they were to inform the overall environment of the meeting.

Casey and I had been talking amongst ourselves for at least the two years before that. We had been reading together and studying together at night, long discussions. We had begun to talk about ourselves as women, and as the staff pondered the question of what would be our vision now and where would we go, how would we develop a structure to support the direction in which we were going, how would we determine where we were going—because process questions always underlay content in SNCC—we decided to raise some things that were bothering us about the subordinate status of women in some projects, about the reflexive use of male organizers as spokesmen, and a potpourri of other concerns. I remember talking with Ruth Howard, with Muriel Tillinghast, with Jean Wheeler Smith, with Dona Richards, with Theresa del Pozzo, with Emmie Schrader during that period. And I started to gather examples from bulletin boards and staff meetings and memos that were coming across my desk and so on. And I put together a memo and I showed it to Casey and she said, yes, she would go along with me on it, but we decided we'd better do this anonymously. I was sure that if we put our names to it, it would be greeted with nothing but a wall of laughter. And to show you how much has changed since then, when Amy Carter read a manuscript of my book *Freedom Song* [1987], she couldn't believe that part. She said, "You weren't really afraid of ridicule, were you? I mean, you had come to grips with your own death and everything; you were afraid they were going to laugh at you?" Yes. We who had come to grips with our own death, we were afraid of what our fellow SNCC staff members were going to say when they read this position paper about women.

When we finally got it distributed, we were right, basically. There were one

or two people who stepped forward but they were noteworthy, they distinguished themselves in supporting it. The women I have already mentioned, of course, were supportive, but among the men there weren't too many. I remember Bob Moses and Charlie Cobb being very supportive, in particular. But very quickly people figured out who it was. And it was out. It was out there on the table and the genie never went back into the bottle.

I'm going to do something that I ordinarily would never do; I'm going to read a segment from my book *Freedom Song*, about something that happened after that paper was circulated.

SNCC always worked extremely hard. It was nothing to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week. We were exhausted half the time. I remember one night that I passed out at 3 A.M. when the telephone rang in the Freedom House in Tougaloo. I went to answer the phone and on the way back to bed, I just passed out, I fainted I was so tired. Well, we always worked hard but we also partied hard. And that night a group of us started drifting down to the pier of Waveland, and it was Stokely Carmichael and Mendy Samstein and Carol Merritt and maybe about twenty of us. And we went down to the pier and Stokely, whom we had "called Stokely Starmichael the summer before in Mississippi because of his natural celebrity," started cracking jokes.

> Cracking jokes one after another, he usually made fun of himself and the people of Trinidad more than of anyone else. It was the same this night. . . . Several . . . of us were beginning to mellow after the traumatic meetings. We were soothed by the gentle Gulf winds that were still warm in November, the lapping waves, and the wine. The moon was bright enough to read by.
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> Stokely started one of his monologues. He led slowly and then began to warm up. One humorous slap followed another. We became more and more relaxed. We stretched out on the pier, lying with our heads on each other's abdomens. We were absorbed by the flow of his humor and our laughter. . . . Stokely got more and more carried away. He stood up, slender and muscular, jabbing to make his points, his thoughts racing. He began to gesticulate dramatically, slapping his thighs and spinning around, thrusting his arm, silhouetted against the moon like a Javanese shadow puppet. . . . He made fun of himself and then he dressed down Trinidadians. He started joking about black Mississippians. He made fun of everything that crossed his agile mind. Finally, he turned to the meetings under way and the position papers. He came to the no-longer-anonymous paper on women. Looking straight at me, he grinned broadly and shouted, "What is the position of women in SNCC?" Answering himself, he responded, "The position of women in SNCC is prone!" Stokely threw back his head and roared . . . with laughter. We all collapsed

> with hilarity. His ribald comment was uproarious and wild. It drew us all closer together, because, even at that moment, he was poking fun at his own attitudes. [*Freedom Song,* pp. 451–452]

Now, that is my version of an account that has been widely reported as a serious comment and was picked up by a great deal of the feminist literature that followed, and I wanted to take this opportunity to set the record straight as I remember it, as Casey and others who were there remember it, and if you ever meet him, ask him what he thinks. But that's the true story as I saw it.

I think it's important to say as well, though, that because all of this occurred in the context of a debate on SNCC's future direction and its structure, that part of what Casey and I were doing in writing that paper was not addressing the concerns of women as a gender statement, so much as it was a belief that if the movement was all that we believed it to be, if leadership was what we believed it to be, then it was appropriate for there to be opportunities to address our agenda too, or for us to raise the things that were of concern to us.

We were concerned that SNCC move in the direction of increasing democratization. I've already discussed the deep gulfs, the ravines that SNCC straddled, questions of decentralization or centralization, of a more authoritarian approach or a more democratic approach, questions of the highly charismatic leader or of leadership from the bottom. There were so many issues, so many polarities that SNCC was constantly grappling with. And in that context, in talking about women, Casey and I were arguing that SNCC should return to the earlier vision of the sit-ins, the period when one acted on one's beliefs, because of a belief that one *was* what one believed. And so in a sense what we were doing in introducing that paper on women was broadening the debate in favor of a more decentralized and democratic SNCC, one that implicitly would be able to address our concerns too, and we were also asking SNCC, will there be room for us as women to act out our beliefs as we had with the early vision of SNCC with the sit-ins.

About a year later the issue had moved along, it was no longer so sensitive. Casey and I went to Virginia and we wrote another paper; this time it was no longer secret, we signed the paper. And the foment on SNCC's structure had deepened by then, so we were, again, basically posing those same questions. We were calling for a return to the basic values of the sit-ins and the early vision of SNCC.

This paper we sent across the country to a group of forty women organizers in some of the other peace and civil rights organizations, the northern student movement, Students for a Democratic Society, others who were organizing. And we talked about a common-law caste system in the larger society. And we

said that subtle attitudes forced women to work around or outside hierarchical structures of power which excluded them. We were no longer talking about SNCC, we were talking about the entire society. I've already mentioned that one of the things we got to do in SNCC was to ask questions with astounding implications, and this is what we were doing again.

We also pointed out that many men wanted to join our dialogue but that others found it hard to respond nondefensively, and we concluded that the problems between men and women functioning in society as equal human beings are among the most basic that people face. We've talked in the movement about trying to build a society which would see basic human problems, which are now seen as private troubles, as public problems and try to shape institutions to meet human needs rather than shaping people to meet the needs of those with power.

I remember years later Barbara Raskin came to see me and she said, "Oh, Mary, I'll never forget the day that your memorandum arrived in the mail. We organized a group here in Washington, a consciousness-raising group it was called later, and we studied that memo and we restudied it and we passed it around amongst ourselves and finally the thing was so dog-eared that we could no longer read it." So that memo sent to those forty women across the country was one spark, one piece of tinder, in the modern women's movement. A year later there was a first women's caucus at the SDS convention in Urbana, and when a group of women walked out of that convention, the ironic thing was that the only man who stood to support them—this was a group of women who had been studying that memo—the only man who rose to support them was Jimmy Garrett, who was the SNCC staff member who ran the Los Angeles office.

Well, the women's movement in the modern sense was clearly the successor movement to the civil rights movement and, of course, there are civil rights issues at the core. It's an error of historiography not only to fail to recognize the role played by SNCC in the civil rights movement, but also not to realize the role of the civil rights movement in building a larger concern for the rights of women in our society. And I want again to point out what was so unique about SNCC was its openness to these questions, that it could nourish Casey and me and others to ask these questions, to write these papers, to pose these things. SCLC was priestly, patriarchal; these questions could never have been raised and there were not the women in the organization to raise them.

I think the last thing that I would like to point out is the incredible synergism that occurs between movements. I agreed completely with Guyot when he pointed out that women who are now half of the delegates of the national Democratic conventions have the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Demo-

cratic Party in 1964 to thank for it. That is absolutely historically correct. So there is an ongoing impulse from the movement that has taken us from one movement to another.

CASEY HAYDEN: I had to get a book to find out what "feminism" meant. So I went and bought this book of essays called *What Is Feminism?* In the last essay I read, the author said that feminists don't know anymore, either. So I figured I was on the cutting edge again.

What I'm going to talk about is the roots of feminism in the redemptive community. I came to feminism raised by a single-parent mother, where I learned what it meant to be poor and matriarchal. I came through the YWCA at the national level, where I learned that roles of men and women were being redefined, and I came through a heavy Christian existentialist background and a college education.

In April of 1960, Connie Curry and Ella Baker were the first advisors to SNCC. Two women, one white, one black, were our first advisors. Connie got invited to be an advisor because she paid the phone bill. Julian would bring her the phone bill and she would pay it out of her grant money for a whole other project. She came through Austin, Texas, and she recruited me, telling me about the sit-ins, and we sat in this café and cried, and little did we know I'd be sitting up here crying now. But I'll be fine.

The sit-ins happened in Austin and because I was living in the only integrated housing on campus, I got involved. And what I got involved in is what Diane Nash described, and I want to run through that again. She said that what we were into at that time was the redemptive community, that we were into healing and reconciling. We were not into gaining power. We felt that what we were doing was more efficient than violence in the struggle for liberation and would achieve liberation for all people more rapidly. She talked about the transition from Gandhi to Lawson to us. Dr. King, of course, was part of this also. I feel that in claiming our victories, we need to claim the great influx of Eastern thinking into this country, which is often associated with hippies and drugs. The sit-in movement is where I first met that thinking, the path I followed. Many people have been political; I have not been political, my path has been a spiritual path and this is where I hit it.

She talked about truth and love. She talked about everything being a series of means; it's not really ends and means, it's always means. She talked about how the enemy is never personal, that the systems and the attitudes of racism, sexism, and so on are the enemy. She said oppression always requires the participation of the oppressed and the role of the oppressed is to withdraw

cooperation. Now this was not Western nor was it masculine; it was basically Eastern. It was basically, in my opinion, feminine; it had to do with where you put your weight. If you didn't have much force you had to figure out how to throw yourself around to catch the other guy off base. You couldn't confront it directly, not while you're still creating mass—which is what we did in Mississippi, we created mass. But at first, you couldn't do that, you had to do this other kind of thing.

I got onto the SNCC staff in the process of getting involved in activity based on these very radical notions of what one was going to do with one's life: transcendent, if you will. You kind of got a new self created. A lot of the old self-definitions fell away; they weren't appropriate anymore. You really stopped thinking about yourself in terms of the limitations of sex or class or race. What you were doing was being a participant with other people in the creation of something, of a movement—there's no other word for it—of a movement, based on these kinds of notions.

There we were doing this. Then we started doing it full time. We created a profession for ourselves. We actually created a profession and it had a name: "organizer." We funded it, and here we were having dropped all these notions of who we were, which were the ways society would have defined us. To be an organizer was very asexual—we were a community of organizers. Whatever you could do, you'd do it. There really weren't any limits. So there we were doing this, and we didn't have any definition then in terms of the general culture. What we had was each other, because we could see ourselves in this new way. That's how I saw the people I worked with. I saw them as my tribe, my family. We lived communally. We lived off the same money. There was no hierarchy in the distribution of that money. We all got a little bit of it.

When I first came to the SNCC conference in the fall of 1960, the three people who were doing the organizing work for that conference were women. It was Connie Curry, Ella Baker, and Jane Stembridge. Jane was another white southerner who Ella had recruited to come be executive secretary for SNCC. Ella, I think, was the main person responsible for the nonviolent ethic, the essence of what we were doing. Even though later a lot of things changed, that place we came from, to me, was always the essence. Our style was how we nurtured that. Because if you're not being seen anywhere, if there's no mirror for you, you've got to see yourself in your family or in your community and that's what we were to each other. I think that's what people mean when they talk about the style of SNCC, the way we were to each other. Every member of the family was equally valued, just like a mother would value all her children. We even had to redefine time. Time was how long it took us, for everybody,

to be able to get into it. When everybody was into it, then we could go do something. Program wasn't an external hierarchical thing. We really remolded what time meant.

Leadership: I thought of it as soft essence but hard politics. Take the idea of turning up leadership. Ella had been through so much and she had seen so many sell-outs that she knew that as soon as somebody got power and authority they were going to rise up into another class. And once they were in that other class and in a certain relation to power, they would no longer be able to represent the interests of the class they came from and they'd be lost. Hey, it happens. We've seen it happen. But it was also that this was the way we had to view each other, because if we didn't view each other that way, we didn't have the sustenance to keep functioning. We couldn't go on if we didn't give everybody the space to talk and get to where we were all comfortable with what we were going to do. We couldn't ask each other to risk our lives.

That was very nurturing, that wasn't patriarchal, wasn't masculine, particularly. It was really new, very nurturing, very loving, and it really was the beloved community. My sense of what we were doing is that we were just trying to bring more and more people into it. And to me—and I was on one wing of this thing, I know I was sort of out in left field—but to me, what we did was a technique to get everybody into our community where we were living in the communal, egalitarian, sexually equal way, this new way. And what I wanted was for everybody to be in there with us, just expand the whole thing. Then we'd have a new society. I read Nadine Gordimer recently, and she says that the reformer is always practical but that the initial impetus is always utopian. I think we were utopian, and maybe for that reason we couldn't go on beyond where utopia meant something. When it got to reformist politics, maybe that's where we floundered.

The other thing about that was the sense of a clan, so that you could distrust everybody else. Particularly with the press this was very effective; it was very important not to believe the press. We created our own myth or our own image. You didn't want to believe what you saw in the news; those of us who were there will never believe what we see in the news. We know the distance between the mass media and the truth. We had to have what we had together or we couldn't have had this attitude we had toward the press, toward what we were getting fed back from the general culture.

This was all going along and we were figuring out what to do, functioning in that mode, and we did the Mississippi Summer, and then after the summer we couldn't figure out what to do. The way I think of it is there were so many things going on that we couldn't weave anymore; there were so many threads

in there that it was tangled up. There was so much happening, everything was knotted up.

We all presented these papers. Now, I don't remember doing this Waveland paper. I mean, I did it, but to tell you the truth, I don't remember it. I was really nervous about its reception. That I remember. The rest of it I don't really remember. I remember it was presented and that I was involved in it. I remember thinking it was not the right issue for that time. The issue at that time was what we were going to do next. We didn't know what to do next. We'd lost the convention challenge. We had all these new people down. The Atlanta office had incredibly ponderous problems to handle caused by the expansion. The cash flow was all chaotic. The issue to me was what are we going to do, because what I'd been doing was over. I had been working on the challenge for the MFDP. I didn't know what to do next. There was a big debate about what to talk about; should we talk about what to do or should we talk about how to structure ourselves to figure out what to do? The people who wanted to talk about what to do didn't want to talk about how to structure ourselves to figure out what to do. So nobody was talking except Forman, who was saying, "We got to figure out how to structure ourselves to figure out what to do." There was hostility. And all these papers. I'm telling this so you can see that between me and Mary, you history scholars, how difficult it is to discern historical truth. Those of us who were there can't get it straight. Don't ever believe what you read in the history books. At best it's a pale approximation.

I felt sorry for Forman and I tried to talk about how we should structure ourselves. I remember I was trying to talk about how we worked in Mississippi where we didn't have a hierarchy, to explain that what we had were work groups. We would have this group that would talk about this, and then that group would talk about this, and we would do it. I had this idea that we could send people to a coordinating group to tell each other what we were doing. Roughly, that was my idea of structure. I also thought that we shouldn't get money, the money should be sent to communities. The communities should fund the organizers. That failed, and was badly spoken of later, I hear.

It was said white people should work with white people and black people should work with black people, and if we could just get that straightened out and get some of these volunteers out of here and get structured, everything would be okay. So I thought, "Well, this is the new line." Off I went to Chicago to work with my people. I got to Chicago to organize a women's welfare recipients union with Appalachian women. It was an SDS project. I was on loan from SNCC to SDS to do this experimental work with white people in the summer of 1965. The group that I went to join was organizing street kids, white

street kids, and I was organizing this welfare recipients union. Little did we know what the connection was between the street kids and the welfare recipient women, many of whom were involved with the street kids. It was very complicated.

By the end of the summer, I realized that I wasn't going to commit myself to the five or ten years it was going to take to make a dent, that we didn't have a clear strategy, and that I was burnt out. So I went to the West Coast and East Coast and traveled around for a few months and ended up in Virginia with Mary. And at that point it was clear that in this knottedness, we had lost our ability to be nurturing (what I consider radically feminine), the way we had learned to be to keep each other upheld. We'd lost it. Maybe we should have broken into small groups. It was very lonely. We didn't. Nobody knew what to do, and I certainly didn't know what to do. There were a lot of rumors. So I said we should write something. Now is the time to write.

That memorandum, which I do remember writing and which I will take responsibility for, and which I reread today—and it's a very good piece of writing and I feel good about it if I do say so myself—was really directed at the notion that it was important to talk about what was important. That it was important to find our issues and talk about them with each other. The sense that we needed to do more work with the women in our community before we tried to go out and organize white women was part of that. To some extent it was strategic, but there was also a sense that it was very important—and I think this is said in the memo—if we could find our own integrity, if we could speak to each other about truth and thereby establish our integrity, we could keep *working*, and that was the issue to me. It was, how are we going to keep working? What is to be done now? What can we do now? Really that was where I was coming from, more than organizing women, or raising the issue of women. It was a technique to keep the community intact.

I know this sounds off-beat and I'm not sure many people can follow it, but the SNCC people will follow what I'm saying, and that is what matters to me.

JEAN WHEELER SMITH: I don't usually get into setting the record straight; I usually don't worry about the record, but there is this one point on which I have some strong feeling and that is the common notion that women were oppressed in SNCC. I just was not oppressed in SNCC. I wasn't subordinate, I was high functioning. I did anything I was big enough to do and I got help from everybody around me for any project that I wanted to pursue. And I know we can put shadows to it and so on, but I wanted to strongly make this point and then maybe move to the shadows.

Stokely gave me my first ticket south. I think Stokely respected me. I think

his comment about women, the position of women being prone, *was* humorous; he's a funny guy, and there was a lot of sex in SNCC. We were twenty years old. What do you expect? I think Stokely respected me and respected the women he was working with at that time. I think he might have wanted to be a successful male chauvinist, but I just don't think he could have gotten away with it.

I wanted to give you some examples of how I as a woman was very much enabled to function to my highest potential. I've heard several references to the death of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner in Mississippi, and I remember that when they were missing and we learned that they were probably dead, we all said, "Well, we have to go to Philadelphia [Mississippi], we can't let this go by, we can't appear to be afraid." And so I guess it was ten or twelve of us decided to go and people volunteered and I was one who volunteered, and nobody ever said, "You're a girl, you can't go." There was just no thought that I couldn't go at this very stressful time into this dangerous situation because I was a woman.

As I remember it, I did everything that everybody else in the project did there. I was scared all the time, but I think they were scared too. I remember that at the end of the time that I was in Philadelphia and the convention organizing had been accomplished, a bus came through. Bob Moses was on the bus and Bob wanted to know, did I want to come up to the convention, to the challenge, and I said, "No, I think my work here is more important than going to the convention." He said, "Fine," he got back on the bus, and I stayed in Philadelphia.

I just had so much freedom to decide how I was going to work and so much support for my decisions that I never ever felt this sense of limitation that people seem to be referring to. I think if we talked about it some more, it would probably fit into Casey's notion that at least before 1965, we were such an egalitarian group that there wasn't room for the limitations imposed by structure. People had titles, but the titles didn't matter. And especially they didn't matter when you were in Mississippi by yourself and there was some sheriff coming toward you with his gun drawn. The title of you or the guy next to you just had no significance.

I want to say something about the female role models that I had in SNCC. Again, I think that the examples before me were of strong black women functioning at their potential. And I want to disagree with Mary a little bit. It seemed like you were making a distinction between people like Mrs. Hamer and Mrs. Johnson and Miss Baker and us, and if you make that distinction then that pulls them away from the group. They really were a part of the group as far as I'm concerned. It didn't matter whether you got paid or not. I mean, you were

making $9.64 anyway—some people made $27, I think, if they were married. The money didn't make any difference. The title, as I remember it, didn't make any difference. So I saw Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Hamer, Miss Baker as part of the group. And they were great role models for me. I still remember Miss Baker monitoring our activity, making sure we were thinking straight, making sure that we were looking at the economic side of things, making sure that this process of arriving at consensus was one that we were carefully sticking to and that everybody was participating in the decision making. She was so powerful that actually I really wasn't even that friendly with her, but she was definitely a woman who was functioning at her highest potential.

Mrs. Johnson—I remember in particular, June, that your father stayed home and took care of the children while she went to jail. I remember very clearly, I was staying in Mrs. Johnson's house, and I had a place on the bed and June's father was on the floor sleeping to accommodate us SNCC workers, and I just can't see that that was a male-dominated chauvinist situation there. I think that throughout our relationships and our working at least until 1965, that that just wasn't the case.

And I remember Martha Norman and I were working for Sherrod in Albany and he wanted to keep us and protect us, and we didn't want to stay there; we thought that Greenwood was a much more sexy place to be, much more exciting and dramatic and powerful, so we waited for Sherrod to go to jail, and as soon as he went to jail, we left at midnight to go and work where we wanted to work in Greenwood, which was much more powerful and dramatic.

I wanted to give some other examples of powerful younger women in the group. Ruby Doris Robinson everybody had incredible respect for. Ruby was executive secretary for a while, but she seemed to run the place as far as I know. My memory is that one day I was sitting around the office in Atlanta, I think I was drinking Cokes and flirting or something, and Ruby came over to me and said, "Get up and go get your license. If you want to go"—I wanted to go to some project—"you can't expect someone's going to drive you there," so it was Ruby who made me go get a license. I remember Annie Pearl Avery, she was a gun-toting cab driver, just completely independent, and functioning in what you would consider to be a typical male role, if you wanted to call it that.

I was thinking about what could be the reason for why this difference in opinion has developed. I don't claim to know much about the women's movement, so this is speculation, but I think one reason is it's a convenient difference; that is, as the time has gone by the history keeps getting rewritten and revised to the convenience of the people who are rewriting it. Maybe also there were some differences between the way the black women in the organization

experienced their situation and the way the white women experienced it. I wouldn't say for sure, but it's something to think about. Casey and I seem to have had about the same experience, but it may be that that changed in later times and that after about 1965 people didn't feel as much a part of the organization and how things were being run.

My sense was that although admittedly the administrative structure on paper was men, the women had access to whatever resources and decision making that they needed to have or wanted to have, and I don't remember being impeded in this. I think another way to understand how we could have arrived at differences of opinion about this is that people had different views about what SNCC was. My view, as I look back on it as a psychiatrist, is it was a human potential movement and that what we were doing on a very large scale, had much in common with what I do in my therapy work on a small individual scale. We were creating a trusting and loving atmosphere and a supportive atmosphere; we transmitted the expectation that change was possible, people were going to get better. We let the person lead. We let the person we were trying to organize, lead. We let him express what was important to him and then we followed. And having let him lead, we then did two things: we'd point out the contradictions; that is, you say "You want this and this, they don't go together; could you look at this another way?" And then we would offer an alternative solution to the solution the person we were trying to organize had historically operated on. That is the way that I understood what I was doing when I was there. And if you look at it that way, then the hierarchical stuff just doesn't matter that much, and I don't think it mattered at least until 1965. I wanted to be pushy about that because I may not get this chance again in another ten years or something, and I do appreciate that there are a lot of grays and shadings to this.

JOYCE LADNER: If you ever saw a group of highly individualistic people, they were in SNCC. We had staff meetings that would last for days and days and you'd think you're going to arrive at a decision after all this dialectical stuff goes on, and then someone jumps up and says, "Well, who gave you the right to decide?" and then you start all over again. Ivanhoe Donaldson, God bless him, was one of the main ones, and Stokely Starmichael, and Courtland Cox, and the Howard University crew—we used to dub them that because they had studied with Bayard Rustin in New York and they were much more ideological than we locals. I was a local Mississippi person, and had a very strong local black southern identity. So there were all kinds of clashing identities based on how people perceived themselves and their roles and the purposes for being in SNCC.

I looked through Clay Carson's book on SNCC, *In Struggle.* Clay is a historian from Stanford who has written the definitive work on SNCC, and I've got a quote from it. What he writes is that "'assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro.' Not only did male staff members feel 'too threatened' to face the subject but many female members were 'as unaware and insensitive as men, just as there are many Negroes who don't understand they are not free or who want to be part of white America.'" It goes on to say that "SNCC should 'force the rest of the movement to stop the discrimination and start the slow process of changing values and ideas so that all of us gradually come to understand that this is no more a man's world than it is a white world.'" [pp. 147–148]. This is quoting the SNCC position paper on women.

I'm reminded of an incident that occurred with my dear sister, Dorie. When Dorie was about twelve years old and I was about eleven (she always says I'm the older), we went to the grocery store—Hudson's Grocery in Palmer's Crossing, four miles outside Hattiesburg, Mississippi—to buy some donuts. There was a white cashier, a man named Mr. Patton who had no fingers on his right hand. Dorie paid Mr. Patton for these donuts; he gave them to her in a brown bag. As she reached for them, he reached over and touched her breasts, which were just beginning to develop. She took the bag of donuts and beat him across the head. Now, why did I tell you that story? I stood there as the little sister watching this. We went home; we ran all the way home, we literally ran, and told my mother what happened. She said, "You should have killed him."

That story has a great deal of importance because we were just two little black poor girls, eleven-, twelve-year-old girls, growing up in Mississippi where you have all these stereotypes about how everyone's oppressed, how people don't even know that they're oppressed. We *knew* we were oppressed. We always knew. We also knew, however, that we came from a long line of people, of women, who were doers, strong black women who had historically never allowed anyone to place any limitations on them. Therefore my mother could say to us, "You should have killed him," and she meant it, because she would have killed him. She would have done precisely that.

Mother never heard of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth; Mother was one of eleven children; Mother went through third grade. But Mother also inherited the tradition that a Sojourner Truth or a Harriet Tubman set before her. I'm not speaking autobiographically so much as I am trying to strike a responsive chord for a generation of young black women from the South who came into SNCC. Our mothers and fathers taught us that we are "as good as anyone." Never allow anyone to call you out of your name. Never allow anyone to

abuse you or to misuse you. Always defend yourself. All of our parents had guns in the home. And they weren't only for hunting rabbits and squirrels, but for self-defense. The South has always been heavily armed, as you well know.

My mother was never involved in the civil rights movement. There were a lot of inherent contradictions in my mother and all the other mothers, because she was terrified of what might happen. When we became involved in the movement she was scared the Klan would come and burn down the house, but at the same time she was the same mother who allowed Vernon Dahmer, who was murdered by the Klan, and Clyde Kennard, who was killed by white racists in Mississippi, to take us as fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls, to Jackson, ninety-four miles away, to the NAACP state mass meetings when Roy Wilkins came to town, when Gloster Current, the director of branches, came to town, when blacks from all over Mississippi would come to these meetings.

It was illegal to be a member of the NAACP in Forrest County, in Mississippi, in Hattiesburg, but people carried their cards very proudly, and we as children in the schools used to whisper and talk rather proud and say, "We heard that Mr. Clark, our math teacher, is a member of the NAACP," and we looked rather favorably on those people. That was the tradition that I come from. It was the tradition of my mentors, including Medgar Evers, who I met in early 1956, 1957, around then, when we used to go with these adults to meetings in Jackson. Medgar Evers came to Hattiesburg in 1959. We were in the eleventh grade, and he helped us to start an NAACP youth chapter. He never turned to us and said "You two Latin girls," as we were referred to, "should let the boys serve as heads of this local youth organization." No one ever told us anything about our limitations because of our gender.

When we went to college, 1960, we used to slip off campus. We spent our first year of college at Jackson State, and it was the single most oppressive experience I ever had in my life. I've had a lot of experiences, but never anything that oppressive. But we used to slip off campus and go two blocks up the street to Medgar Evers's office to talk to him, to keep in touch with what was going on. He told us that students at Tougaloo College were going to stage a sit-in. Sit-ins had occurred all over the South, but not in Mississippi. But the NAACP did not consider it in any way wise to stage a sit-in in a public accommodations facility. What they did decide to do was to challenge another kind of institution. They had Tougaloo students sit in at the public library. We asked him if we could participate. And a very strange thing, the one reason we couldn't was that we would have been expelled from Jackson State immediately on a technicality. If you can believe this, it was that we would have had to sign out—you had to sign out every place you went—to the public library and it was illegal to go there. So we didn't, but he told us, you can be very helpful, you can

go back to your campus and you can tell people quietly, without attribution as to where this is coming from, that there is going to be an event taking place. So we did. We listened to the radio all day, waiting to hear the news about these students sitting in and being arrested. To make a long story short, we helped to organize a small core of people on campus. James Meredith was one of the people. We had to organize a prayer. The demonstration that evening in front of the library turned into a major altercation with the president of the college, who went absolutely crazy and knocked my roommate down and beat a lot of other people up. We marched downtown the next day and that became a protest against the school itself, and they told us not to come back. Tougaloo was the first time I really experienced true freedom.

Also in the spring of 1961, Medgar told us that there was a young man in his office and he said, "I'd like to introduce you to someone." You never asked questions back then; we were quiet. He said, "I want you to meet Tom Gaither, he's come here to help Negroes get their freedom." That's all he ever told us. As it turned out, Tom was the first organizer, he was a CORE field secretary who would come in to lay the groundwork for the Freedom Rides. I didn't know that. I never asked about it; I mean, what kind of freedom is he going to help us get?

It was soon after the Freedom Rides, in the early fall, that I began to meet some of the young women and men who were my kind of people. I began to meet people like Diane Nash, later Ruby Doris, and all the other people. And the most important thing was I began to meet local Mississippi people who had grown up feeling as stifled as I, who had grown up feeling that they had ideas they wanted to express and that they couldn't. To have things they wanted to do with their lives and to feel totally constrained is a horrible feeling. When I began to meet other people throughout the state who felt that, who were brought up the same way, it was like I'd died and gone to heaven, to meet people like Susan Ruffin who had lived on like $27—and Mrs. Hamer and all these other people, and to meet Guyot out at Tougaloo, was just an extraordinary experience.

None of these women I began to meet knew they were oppressed because of their gender; no one had ever told them that. They were like my mother, and they'd been reared in the tradition of my mother and my mother's five sisters. They had grown up in a culture where they had had the opportunity to use all of their skills and all of their talents to fight racial and class oppression, more racial than anything else. They took their sexuality for granted, for it was not as problematic to them as their race and their poverty. And perhaps they didn't know they were oppressed because of their gender, they were so busy trying to survive and to fight day to day. It would have been a luxury for

my mother to focus on gender concerns. It would never have occurred to her; neither would it have occurred to me at that time because it was not a problem, it was never problematic.

We assumed we were equal. When we got into SNCC I would have been ready to fight some guy if he said, "You can't do this because you're a woman." I would have said, "What the hell are you talking about?" A lot of the women in SNCC were very, very tough and independent minded. In fact, the most independent-minded people you'll ever meet were in SNCC, men and women. They would argue with a signpost. If you were weak and didn't have really strong and firm beliefs about whatever it is you thought you believed in, you didn't survive. You couldn't survive. It was one of the most hostile cultures in which you were trying to operate, the external culture. You were trying to operate against a perceived common foe and that common foe was what kept us so tightly knit together, as Casey has so eloquently put it. Our enemy was always an external one. It was not internal, at least not through those early years, and I think we do have to make a division between pre-1964 and post-1964. There were very, very different kinds of ideas and ideologies and values and so on that operated then.

But for many of us, I think, SNCC gave us the first structured opportunity to use our skills in an egalitarian way without any kind of subjugation because of our race or our class or our gender. And also it's very, very important that we not be guilty here, or ever, of using retrospective analysis and imposing current feminist theory onto the realities of 1963. I think that's a critical fact. I read feminist theory, I teach it, some parts of it, I'm conversant with it, but we can't take those models and impose them onto a different historical era, a different time, a different place. The models that people have described here came out of the context of the times.

Sure there were no women who ever chaired SNCC, but I bet you ten to one Ruby Doris dominated SNCC. We'd have a little joke, is it Jim running SNCC or Ruby Doris? I mean, what was a chairman? Who cared? Nobody really even cared. People at SNCC were so antiauthoritarian that if they thought you were going to begin to emerge, they'd bring you back down, grab you and snatch you down. Some of the biggest jokes were made about Stokely, Stokely Starmichael, who does he think he is? But those same people, we still embrace him and love him very much. It was not a hostile, nasty comment at all, but it was just that we were very, very antiauthoritarian.

The point I'm trying to make is the context of time is very, very critical. And that for many of us, SNCC gave us the first structured opportunity to really use our potential, to use our abilities, and to express our views on the world, the state of the world. We assumed we were equal. We were treated that way.

Most people who came into SNCC were more independent-minded than most people in the rest of the country; most people on the outside. The fainthearted didn't last.

Our relationships were defined, like I said, first and foremost by the task at hand. Matters of life and death were abundant, especially in some of the tough times in Mississippi. I can remember February 1963, when Jimmy Travis got shot in Greenwood. I can remember any number of terrible events when you didn't focus on what we would have considered ridiculous concerns, but you focused rather on things at hand. I think to a great extent that is why we came here now and sang. It evoked certainly within me some of the same feelings, the texture of the same feelings I remember having felt thirty years ago. Those things fortified us against all of these other concerns out there; it fortified us against a hostile racist society. That was our common foe.

And it was within SNCC that this beloved community operated for a while, and it was within that context that I thought I was equal. I thought I was a full participant. Because all of us came with a stronger sense of our own identity, a stronger sense of purpose, I believe. Most of us did. It's not to suggest that everyone was tough and strong and so on. Some people really weren't, and we have a lot of casualties who aren't here today, and I think about that a lot. We discussed that, and but for the grace of God, any one of us could have been a casualty. It was a very tough time to be a young person growing up, but I think we were emboldened by those experiences.

It was not until a decade after leaving SNCC that I began to read some of the works on the movement, maybe even a little longer than a decade. Sara Evans's *Personal Politics* [1979] was totally rubbish. I mean, it's revisionist to the core. She didn't even interview the right people, the people she should have talked to who could have told her what really happened. Michelle Wallace, I would put at an even lower scale when she talks about *Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman* [1979]—I've waited for this chance for about ten years. And given the cheers I guess I speak on behalf of my sisters out there. At SNCC you never know. When I walked down here they all said, "Who gave you the right to speak?" But again, I think it is a real danger, people revising or trying to understand what happened without really taking the time and the effort to understand, to get the story right.

A final point I'll make here is that SNCC challenged authority of all kinds. It's not coincidental that people like Victoria Gray (who is my cousin) talked about having challenged authority as a child. I think all of us did. And what we used in SNCC were kind of shock trooper tactics. What I think that the analysts, the scholars, have gotten wrong, and other popular writers have gotten wrong, is that they say that feminism emerged because of dissension within

the ranks. Rather, feminism is an outgrowth; it emerged because SNCC served as a model, a prototype of what could become a better kind of society. It gave rise to not only a feminist consciousness but other groups like gay people, the elderly, students, a whole range of people within the society who had also been oppressed. They began to use the SNCC model to pattern their own movements.

It was not dissension within the ranks. It's true a lot of people perceived themselves as having different kinds of experiences and different interests. It was normal, natural, it was to be expected. But I don't think that we were oppressed women who got angry because Stokely—and this is putting it overly simplistically, of course—because Stokely said that our position was prone. I would have said, "Stokely, what the hell do you mean? What are you talking about?" And he would have laughed and we would have just teased him and moved on. For a movement to use that as a rallying cry is very unfortunate; it's more pathetic than ridiculous. And again, the context was missing, the texture of the times was missing; it's missing so often by people today.

I can remember the men driving, and them pushing us to the floor when danger approached. I didn't want to sit in the front. For black people, black southern people, especially, we understood that as a kind of protectiveness, like a brother would protect. But someone else, if you were coming from the North, if you were white, if you had a different set of experiences, you might have perceived that to have been discrimination or whatever. Maybe you would have wanted to drive.

I wanted to make one last brief point. I've been thinking about organizing tactics that SNCC people would have used that would help us to begin to organize low-income black people. What kind of organizing would work, how could we stop kids from killing each other at twelve years old? I'm not content to sit here and talk about what *was*. I think the important thing is to address whether all these wonderful things we've just said about our glorious past, admittedly, the most important period of my life, whether we can extrapolate something from that period that could work today when we see black people and poor people of all races have sunk to new depths. How can we restore some of this, if not the beloved community, certainly some very basic commonsense organizing? How can we infuse the current generation of young people, young activists, with a sense of purpose and with some of our hope that we still maintain after two decades, to go out and to challenge some of the thorniest problems this society has ever faced?

PRATHIA HALL: I resonate with everything that was said, especially the outrage at the notion that any of us could have been oppressed because of

gender in SNCC. Also, that kind of protectiveness, well, Sherrod tried it in southwest Georgia, a loving kind of protection, and it didn't work because the other thing is that when everybody was wounded, then whoever could get up first was the one who had to get up first and move, and that was just a reality.

However, something *did* happen in our community after 1965, something *did* happen as we moved to Black Power and as we moved to black nationalism and as the Black Muslims became very prominent in terms of their attitude toward women. I think that historically there's some kind of cycle here which I don't really understand yet, but I'm trying to, because things have happened generationally to us as black women in terms of where we stood with black men. After that, there was a sense of the whole matriarchy thing, and wanting our family to look like what we were told white families looked like, and so many younger black women at that point became very defensive about their strengths. And we have gone through a period of black women being extremely repressed, at least, in terms of ambivalence about strength, assuming a responsibility for the violation of black men.

And since work in the church where there is extraordinary baggage that is still alive, and operating against our being who we were in SNCC. So it is hard now for many male leaders. You're right, I am a strong black woman, and I could not have been that in SCLC, I've always known that. But there is a need, I think, for us to understand some of those dynamics in terms of some of the changes that we went through. Some of it is still a poison in the community. There's a whole lot of stuff going on between young brothers and young sisters—"you gonna be my woman, you gonna do what I say"—there's a sense of this, for instance, in the church, that in order to reclaim black men somehow black women have to step aside. In so doing, we assist our enemies in our oppression; we participate in the further dividing of us so that in what is referred to as the underclass, we have a hell over here in which black males exist, and a hell over there in which black women and children exist. Separate from each other: unable to inspire, to embrace, to strengthen, to renew, to support each other in the ways that we experienced in SNCC.

And there has been a movement to deny what the reality was that we so passionately affirm right now. I'm scared that what we experienced could be lost, in the naming and the blaming and the scapegoating, and I just know that black men and black women cannot stand that. We cannot survive it. So there's a need for us to move beyond this. Nobody could have pulled us down if they wanted to, but there were other ways in which subtly we were impacted. I see it happening among young brothers and sisters now, and if we don't name it, we won't be able to deal with it.

KATHIE SARACHILD: I had a different kind of experience. I was a volunteer in the summer of 1964, and I went back in the spring from March through June of 1965. I don't know if Mary remembers it, but I was recruited by her and Emmie Schrader to go back in March to work on the filmstrip project that they were organizing. I met them both on a New York street corner in late February and they talked me into quitting my job and going back down. And I subsequently became very involved in the early stages of the launching of the independent women's liberation movement. I had something to contribute later from what I learned as a volunteer; in that I agree. I agree very much that it was basically the positive experiences of SNCC rather than the problems of male chauvinism that were really the most significant in the stirring of the women's liberation movement and the mobilizing of it in this country.

Even though I did experience sexism as far back as 1964, in my case I was already aware or conscious of male chauvinism as a political problem. I had come from an Old Left family and people talked about male chauvinism and gossiped about who was a male chauvinist, and I had learned that there was discrimination against women in the society. So that running into it in SNCC was nothing really new or special about SNCC. It was rampant in the Old Left and the New Left. What was new in SNCC were these positive things. I'll get to that.

Anyway, in 1964 when I was down there in the summer, many of the classic things had happened. It's not just a question of being protected, although that was an issue that arose in the project I was working on. There were a lot of people registering to vote in Batesville, Mississippi; it was the only town in the state where there was a court injunction, and therefore you didn't have to read, cite, or write about the Mississippi constitution to register. Of course it was a risk: your name got put in the paper, you got fired from your job. But at least you could actually get registered if you were willing to take the risk. So there were all kinds of legal things that had to be done. You had to post a notice on the courthouse bulletin board, and there was a big discussion in the project about who should post the notice. There were both black women and white women in the project and black men and white men and all the men immediately decided that it should be a man who should go down and post the notice, whereas my first instinct had been it ought to be a woman because she would be less noticed. We just didn't take it, of course, we fought back. But we had to have a struggle over it and I think we actually won that struggle—through logic. That kind of thing was just interesting; it had been so illogical.

But there was the constant problem of sharing the housework and, once

again, maybe it was because I expected men to share the housework and a lot of other people didn't. I expected especially radical men to, even though I knew it was hard to get them to do it. Still we would fight about the housework. I think Stokely Carmichael plays all kinds of roles in history about this too, because he was quite good on the basic issues, as I recall, like sharing the housework. In my project, I remember one time we had been struggling for a whole month to get the men to do the housework, and Stokely drove in as a roving organizer—helping all the projects—with his entourage. We were all sitting around in this farmhouse and he just gets up at the end of the meal and says, "Well, let's do the dishes," and proceeds to do them. So on the real nitty-gritty issues like housework he, in my experience, was good.

The other part that he played here, I think, was this line to the white people in SNCC that probably many people had, but I remember it mostly connected with him: it's time to fight your own oppressors. I remember he used that phrase; many other people did too. And even then I was thinking, "Fight your own oppressors," what would that mean? I knew there was a class problem, but I must say I began thinking about it in connection with women's liberation when I came back down in March. I almost thought it was my duty as a white organizer to start thinking about it. But I didn't think about women's liberation as a possible movement until I came back down in March. And I arrived back in Batesville, and another volunteer who had stayed all winter, Chris Williams, who later married Penny Patch, a SNCC staff person from way back, he came running up to me because he had been one of the few men on the project the summer before who had done the dishes and the housework. He came running up to me and he said, "Oh Kathie, you'll be so excited to know that there's something going on called 'women's liberation.'" And he mentioned something about how there had been a sit-in in the SNCC office and that Mary King and Casey Hayden had written a paper and Ruby Doris Robinson had read it to a workshop at the Waveland staff meeting.

Mary asks in her book where did this myth arise that Ruby Doris Robinson had written or read their paper. I don't know how it came about, maybe other people were trying to pin feminism on Ruby Doris Robinson, I don't know, but back then there was already a legend as early as 1965 in Batesville, Mississippi, that Ruby Doris Robinson had read this paper.

And somehow that was the connection—that a movement was starting on this issue, a movement like SNCC, like civil rights. I had always known the issue, but the positive thing of a movement on the issue, and a possibility of a grass-roots movement, such as had been spreading through the South but in this case of women, the white women who we were supposed to go organize—anyway, the point was this possibility of a *movement* on an issue that I don't

think any of us had conceived of then. That it was possible to have a movement about it even though it was an old issue. And a movement like SNCC was what was so important and was another part of what was so important about SNCC.

JEAN WHEELER SMITH: It seems to me that your comments were just what you said you weren't going to do; that is, you said you thought that the more important thing was the positive modeling that the movement provided for, for women or for the development of the women's movement or other movements, and then you focused on the opposite. And I'm pointing it out because I think that's what happens when people write their histories.

KATHIE SARACHILD: Well, no, my point is that you can't leave that out, you need both, they're both true.

JEAN WHEELER SMITH: Yes, ma'am, I'm just saying I think you did what people do.

MARY KING: I would like to say something about that too. I think this is the same issue that I addressed myself to earlier, that what happens afterward is that all these people who see themselves as authorities write books or produce television programs which millions of people see and read and talk about, which then say X, Y and Z happened. And I think it's just like the rest of what happens in America where you can just barely, barely believe that there's a truth, a seed of truth in anything you see on television or appears in the media. Sure, you couldn't help noticing certain things that were happening if you were a man or a woman, and noticing certain patterns. But they were just what they were, patterns. They were like Jean says, gray areas. So you talked about it somewhat, then somebody else writes four books about it and says well it was this, that, and the other thing and completely distorts the reality and the emphasis. Just like the movement has been distorted in its reality and its emphasis and I think the same thing has happened here.

I think you have to learn to really read this stuff or listen to this stuff with only a very little bit of belief because most of it, just like most of the history of mankind on this planet, has been totally distorted by a group of so-called scholars.

MICHAEL THELWELL: With great trepidation, I speak. I just want to make two points. One is if one remembers the history of the organization and the founding president who gave form and spirit to it, it is Miss Ella Baker.

Miss Ella Baker had struggled with chauvinism all her life and particularly in SCLC, and she mourned it. And you know she wasn't going to create no organization that would recapitulate that.

And number two, it's with extraordinary pleasure and pride that I listened to my sisters in the movement. The only people who can say whether my perceptions of what that organization represented are right are my sisters, and I was very pleased and agreed with what they said. But the fact is, you don't have to take my word. I'll tell you what, you can solve it with just a simple application of intelligence. We were a very self-selecting organization. My recollection of the organization is that they were heroes, the women and the men. I'm a very irreverent person, I don't respect many people, but I had incredible respect for all those young people in that organization who were taking those kinds of risks and coming through. And the quality of support that they described is absolutely accurate in my recollection. But I ask you this simple question: no matter how brave and tough and firm the men in SNCC were, and I think they had to have been just to survive, but here you have Joyce Ladner and Mary King and Sister Jean, and this little fast one here, Prathia Hall—look at those women and tell me which man will oppress them.

CASEY HAYDEN: I just wanted to make two short comments. One is I worked for Ella Baker, she was my boss, in the Y job I had. Mary worked for her too, and I think a lot of the thinking that we did together really was inspired by her. And about cleaning and the issue of housework; as far as I remember, no one cleaned the Freedom Houses.

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON: The Civil Rights Movement was the borning struggle for this time, and there's no progressive organizing that has come out of this society since that is not based on it, and that includes the women's movement. One always has the choice of looking for the strands of continuity and seeing that things have continued to move from one group to the other as they try to grapple with restructuring their space in society. Let us say that some aspect of the women's movement was generated in SNCC. The implication is still that it was not generated *by* SNCC, that there were these people who were in SNCC who created something that was not SNCC. The document in question critiquing the status of women within SNCC was authored by White members of the organization. That document moved through society as an aberration without any acknowledgment that this document is a SNCC document. SNCC, in fact, was an organization where you could say what you thought, if you found the courage.

I have a feeling that there was something racist working, that needed that

statement, of women critiquing their experience in their organization, to not be a SNCC-generated memo or a SNCC-generated thrust. If it is a group, on retreat, that meets for four days inviting and hearing every possible proposal under the sun, then everything that comes up belongs to that gathering. And as far as I am concerned there isn't anything that's happened to Mary King or Casey Hayden that was not created in SNCC in terms of their being able to do whatever it was they did. I didn't do what they did, but SNCC is the place that gave me the opportunity to do what I did. We really have to watch racism, because if the group is integrated and an energy is created by some White people in the group, often when it is transmitted to the larger culture, and other people start to read into it, they will separate it out as if it was not created by the structure that made it possible for it to occur. And you can just look at the struggle in the women's movement around how White it is. I mean people really try to make stuff White, even if it ain't.