

12th Annual Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Symposium Lecture Series  
October 4-6, 1995: Panel on "Feminists and Women: Their Roles,  
Rights and Opportunities During the Movement" 8:30 am - 10 am,  
October 4, 1995.

Because I am quoted in various publications as having co-authored a paper on women in the movement in 1964 while on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, I've been invited to speak a number of times at conferences like this one. I have found a good deal of confusion, controversy even, on the topic of this panel. I'd like to contribute because I may be able to help clear things up.

I grew up until I was 10 in a home composed of my ailing grandfather, my aunt and my mother. After I was 13, my mother raised me and my half sister as a single parent, sending us both to college on a secretary's salary. As a student leader with the YWCA I worked in dual leadership with YMCA members. As a national staff person with the YWCA I worked in an all female organization. While working in Atlanta with SNCC I read de Beauvoir and Lessing and Friedan. I talked with many women about being women. I didn't call myself a feminist and never have but certainly I was questioning and searching in this, as in all other areas of my life, for the radical truth.

I came to the movement as a white Southerner from a religious and human relations background. I'd studied theology, been part of integrated groups, shared leadership nationally with black co-chairpersons, lived in integrated housing and taught in primarily black inner-city vacation bible school, all through the auspices of church and YWCA, before I joined the sit-in movement while a graduate student at the University of Texas in 1960. From then on through 1965, I was in and out of the black community as organizer and staff person for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

As a Southerner, I considered the Southern Freedom Movement Against Segregation mine as much as any one else's. I was working for my right to be with who I chose to be with as I chose to be with them. It was my freedom. However, when I worked full time in the black community I considered myself a guest of that community, which required decency and good manners, as every Southerner knows. I considered myself a support person; my appropriate role was to provide support from behind the lines, not to be a leader in any public way. Informally, within SNCC, I found I was listened to and respected and carried some weight. To be a

public, or movement, leader was not one of the opportunities that would present itself to me, as I understood the situation. Whites had led African Americans long enough. It wasn't that within SNCC I didn't have a right to leadership (witness Bill Hansen, white project director in Arkansas) but that it would have been counterproductive. In like manner of thinking, I chose not to work in the field except in the comparatively safe setting of Tougaloo, on a literacy project, and then because the request was specifically made that I do so because I had a background in English education. I preferred not to work where I would endanger my comrades, and being a white woman meant that wherever I was, the movement was visible, and where there was visibility there was danger, not to mention that my presence carried with it the possibility of lynching for my male colleagues. However, working in an office in no sense meant that I did office work as it is traditionally understood. I had a great deal of responsibility, first in Atlanta as Northern Coordinator, setting up the groundwork and organizing Friends of SNCC groups, which involved creating networks and public relations materials and events, as well as considerable interpretation of SNCC and the movement to supporters outside the South. Later, here in Jackson, I was one of the main staff in Freedom Summer as researcher and coordinator for Mississippi organizing for the challenge to the seating of the all-white regulars at the 1964 Democratic Convention.

In those roles, I did the work all the way up and down. That means I did my own typing and mimeographing and mailing and I also did my own research and analysis and writing and decision making, the latter usually in conversation with other staff. As we said at the time, both about our constituencies and ourselves, "The people who do the work should make the decisions." There were no secretaries in SNCC, with the exception of Norma Collins in the Atlanta office, so there was no office hierarchy. I was at the center of the organization, unlimited except by my own choices and challenged at every turn to think and do and grow and care. The need was great in the movement for skills of all kinds, I had some, and I was happy to be useful.

Following the summer of 1964, along with several other women, distressed at the exit of support for the movement on all levels with the end of the summer project, I began the development of later very successful technical support for SNCC's organizing in Mississippi, or what we called movement infrastructure. We set about learning photography and raising funds for a darkroom and the training of local Mississippians to do their own photographic documentation of and for their own movement. Additionally at that time, the photo project began to produce film strips for use in local organizing, including one on how to organize an agricultural cooperative. In 1965, as sentiment grew for whites to organize whites, I travelled to Chicago, as SNCC staff on loan to Students for a Democratic Society, to begin organizing displaced Appalachian women on welfare. During the course of the time in Chicago, my interest grew in seeking the source of my own oppression and organizing on behalf of institutions in the white

community which could support social change, work which has continued my whole life.

After the summer of 1964 SNCC had a staff meeting at Waveland Mississippi and all staff were requested to write about what was on their minds. A paper was introduced called "The Position of Women in SNCC". I recall working on that paper with a group of women at night in a room where the mimeograph machine was, all of us gathered around the typewriter. I don't remember much else except that a number of phrases in the piece were mine. My friend Mary King, in her book Freedom Song, says she wrote this paper with advice from me. She was certainly part of that group. I've recently been seeing some of the other women who recall being involved in this writing, and different notions about authorship are coming to light. Several women recall the room and the typewriter and were obviously there as the document was being composed. Elaine Delott Baker, who came on the staff of Freedom Summer just prior to the training program for volunteers in June of 1964, remembers writing the section which begins the document, (a list of complaints about inequality of access to leadership on the part of women in SNCC), and some of the text which follows, which drew a parallel between inequality of treatment of Afro Americans and women. Elaine and Emmie Schroeder Adams, another white woman who arrived just prior to the summer and worked at the center of the Summer Project without having previously been on SNCC staff, were from Radcliff, brilliant and well travelled. Elaine had been living for a year on kibbutz in Israel and Emmie had been to Kenya as part of Crossroads Africa and later at the center of the new independence. In this account of the document, Elaine's list and her impatience devolve from her comparing the radically nonsexist Israeli kibbutz and the movement, and her experience, and Emmie's, of having been in countries where the revolution had won. My contribution seems to be to try to tone the whole thing down, assessing (accurately) its negative reception and pleading for a sympathetic hearing. As we reconstructed the writing of this paper, I realized I was caught in the middle. I had talked with these women as we thought about parallels between being black and women, so I felt some loyalty to them and the issues. On the other hand, I wouldn't have raised the issue in this way, because I didn't feel SNCC limited me as a woman. Not to say general societal views about sexual role weren't present in SNCC, but I had responsibility, control of my work at all levels, and access to power. As a guest in the black community, I don't know that I would have said anything if I had felt limited. To have done so would not have been mannerly. Additionally, SNCC was at a difficult place in its own history and I was deeply involved in the struggle to create understanding so we could all keep working together. This was the burning problem for me and I was afraid raising women's position as an issue would simply create more divisiveness at a time when we seemed to be divided on many fronts. I handled these conflicts by trying to make the piece more understandable, less offensive.

Mary King says we were asking SNCC to broaden its concerns, to

take women's roles on as an issue. I don't believe I ever felt SNCC should do that. The movement had enough to do. Additionally, I think the movement represented certain developmental goals in the black community which precluded taking on women's issues. The purpose of the writing was more diffuse than that, as I recall, more like everyone was writing about whatever their gripes or problems or positions were and, hey, let's put ours out there, too. In late 1965 I did feel the time was right and drafted a memo which Mary and I signed and sent to our black and white women friends in SNCC and the new left. My express purpose was to create conversations among us about what mattered to us, strengthening the bonds between us which sustained us, and thus strengthening the movement from within.

I also need to differ with Cynthia Washington, whose memories of a conversation we had in the Jackson office were included in the recent publication Trailblazers and Torchbearers. Cynthia recalled my complaining about being a secretary and about how other women were also secretaries. She remembered assuming that was all we could do since it was what we were doing. Her response probably does represent black women's views of the paper and does reveal how we operated in SNCC, where we pretty much did do what we could do. And it probably represents a new staff person's view of the Jackson office. But the conversation probably didn't take place as she remembered it, as I wasn't a secretary and neither was anyone else, and I had no complaints. I seem to have gotten mixed up with the position paper. We used to say in SNCC that if you read about something in the paper, all you really knew was that something probably happened. I sometimes think that is true of movement histories.

Confusion about women in the movement seems to spring in part from the fact that the position of women in the movement was first raised in the Waveland paper, which was framed as complaint. Providing an alternative view of the context of the writing of this paper may help create a clearer picture of the varieties of experiences we had in the movement and varieties of backgrounds from which we came, as well as the goodwill and comradery that existed among all of us, while not detracting from the questioning and pushing back of limits in which we were engaged at all levels. Thank you for the opportunity to set the record straight. I hope by sharing this small piece of my experience I've helped clarify the roles, rights and opportunities of women and feminists in the movement. Aside from being a mother, the movement was the most transforming event of my life, full of endless opportunities for growth of mind and spirit. I am grateful to have been a part of the movement and pleased to reflect on it for this conference in Mississippi, whose people provided me with such inspiration and where such profound events occurred.

Final Revision 8/29/95 Tucson  
Casey Hayden

August 23, 1995

Ms. Mary Coleman  
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FAX 601-968-2904

Dear Ms. Coleman:

I am honored to be invited to participate in the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Symposium Lecture Series. Unfortunately, I have another commitment. I tried to alter my schedule, but that has proven to be impossible, so I must decline to appear.

However, I do feel I have something to contribute on the topic you propose, and I have taken the liberty of putting my thoughts on paper and I am enclosing them herewith. Mr. McLemore indicated Doris Derby, Bernice Reagon, and Bill Strickland would be on the panel. I know them from the old days and I am going to send these reflections to them. I would like to see this paper read as part of the panel or elsewhere in the symposium, but ~~that~~ isn't possible or appropriate, could you find a way to make them part of the conference proceedings, perhaps by distribution? If not, if you publish, I would like to be included. Whatever.

Again, thank you for inviting me. I am so sorry I can't be there.

Best wishes for success in this very fine endeavor,



Casey Hayden

enc.

cc: Leslie McLemore  
Doris Derby  
Bernice Johnson Reagon  
William Strickland

Sandra Cason  
a/k/a  
Casey Hayden  
927 North Tenth Avenue  
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August 29, 1995

Ms. Mary Coleman  
Acting Chair, Department of Political Science  
Jackson State University

FAX 601-968-2904

Dear Ms. Coleman:

Attached please find a revised copy of my contribution to your conference. Please replace the pervious fax with this one and I'll send it to the folks I copied in the previous correspondence with you. Thanks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Casey Hayden". The signature is written in black ink and has a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

Casey Hayden

enc.

RE. Fannie Lou Hamer Symposium