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# How do historians view the contributions of Black women to the Civil Rights Movement?

Historians disagree on the best way to categorize Black women’s contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. Below, there is a key quote from each historian. How would you categorize their approach? Is it grassroots, feminist, optimistic, etc?

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| **Historian** | **Quote** | **Source** |
| Charles Payne | “men led, but women organised.” | Charles Payne, ‘Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta’, in ***Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (1993), ed. by Vicki L. Crawford et al.,** pp. 1-12. |
| Belinda Robnett | Women are “bridge leaders.”  | **Belinda Robnett,** ‘African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership and Micromobilization,’ *American Journal of Sociology*, 101 (6) (1996), 1661-1694. |
| Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard | Women’s activism took multiple forms. Women did not just operate behind the scenes. | Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds, *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (2009). |

**Task: Rank the above historians from ‘most convincing’ to ‘least convincing.’ A longer version of the summaries above can be found over the page. Once you have done this, prepare a defence of your placings.**

**You may also take place in a classroom debate where three teams each advocate for a different perspective.**

**Charles Payne:**

“One of the important questions emerging from any study of the civil rights movement is the question of the overparticipation of women. My respondents, male and female, unanimously agree with Lawrence Guyot, a member of SNCC: “It’s no secret that young people and women led organizationally.” Women took civil rights workers into their homes, of course, giving them a place to eat and sleep, but women also canvassed more than men, showed up more often at mass meetings and demonstrations, and more frequently attempted to register to vote.” (p. 1-2)

**Belinda Robnett:**

“An analysis of gender has led to a reconceptualization of leadership activities within social movements. Within the context of the civil rights movement, African- American women operated as "bridge leaders," who-through frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation-initiated ties be- tween the social movement and the community and between prefigurative strategies aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness and political strategies aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions (see Breines 1982; Gamson 1992; and Tarrow 1992). The activities of African-American women in the civil rights movement provided the brid- ges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and the political life of civil rights movement organizations.” (p. 1664)

**Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard**

“This anthology takes as its starting point the twin assertions that women organized in the national and international arena as well as leading on the local level, and that women shaped the radicalism that developed in the postwar period by working as key strategists, theorists, and activists. Expanding beyond the “men led but women organized” paradigm of women’s leadership, these essays demonstrate how women’s leadership took many forms in the black freedom struggle and detail the work it took to sustain a radical vision and political engagement over the long haul. Challenging the limits of the “bridge leader” framework for understanding the breadth of black women’s roles in the movement, these essays show the diversity of black women’s experiences, roles, and philosophies. Some women assumed the position of charismatic leader; others stood philosophically opposed to such models for movement building and helped instead to build democratic organizing structures; still others had to create new structures and political movements free from racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia to nourish their visions of liberation.” (p. 5)