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**THE UNACKNOWLEDGED WORKS OF THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN
LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE/ WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONAL MOVEMENT FOR
EQUALITY NOW**

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Abstract

This research paper is going to focus on the impact, works, and achievements of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N and the contributions that have gone unrecognized before and since the formation of the organization. The goals of this research are to expose, enlighten, and bring awareness to the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. and their accomplishments and struggles that are not commonly talked about and known of. We will be proving that the organization was relevant upon formation, despite the opinions of the male-dominated SCLC organization. The pioneers and subsequent leaders of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. will be acknowledged, and their contributions to the Atlanta Community will be highlighted.

Introduction

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) is a civil rights organization founded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery ¹. The organization was primarily dominated by male, black, Baptist ministers. However, significant women leaders such as Ella Baker and Septima Clark emerged and were responsible for numerous programs, but were not always credited and were marginalized for their ideas, even blatantly ignored at times. In 1979, Evelyn Gibson Lowery, the wife of Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery, founded the SCLC/Women's Organizational Movement for Equality Now (SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.). She gathered some women in her southwest Atlanta home - Mattie Jones, Ms. Gwendolyn Campbell, Sue Ross and Janice Alexander - to share her vision about implementing an organization. Her vision was for an organization that would "offer intergenerational programs designed to empower women, girls, and families as they relate to human rights, social actions economic

self-sufficiency, reduction of health disparities and leadership to build strong families and communities”². The organization was established to “champion the rights of women, children, and families, and to respond to the problems of the poor and disenfranchised.”³.

Evelyn Gibson Lowery marched alongside her husband in the Selma-Montgomery March of 1965, as well as for the Voting Rights Act of 1982 amidst bomb threats and other life-threatening conditions. Mrs. Lowery was also shot twice by members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) during a peaceful protest and also jailed multiple times in Washington D.C., Atlanta, and North Carolina.

As a part of SCLC/W.O.M.E.N, Mrs. Lowery has established 11 monuments and memorials to commemorate civil rights activists some of whom lost their lives. Activists celebrated were Viola Liuzzo, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Albert Turner, Sr., Rev. James Orange, Rev. Hosea Williams, Congressman John Lewis, Rev. James Reeb, and Mr. Earl Shihoster³. SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. also developed the National AIDS Awareness Program, in which trained ministers enlightened the masses via workshops about AIDS and its prevention⁵. The organization also developed a conference “AIDS and the African-American Community” which also delved into why minorities, including African-Americans, were not privy to “adequate healthcare information from mainstream health care systems.” SCLC/W.O.M.E.N also developed an information handbook regarding AIDS⁴.

Since there is already a substantial volume of information available on Mrs. Lowery, we hope to focus on the other leaders of SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. who have since emerged and made advancements. The goals of this research are to identify the under recognized leaders and accomplishments of the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. organization during and after the Civil Rights era.

We will be highlighting their contributions to the African American communities all over the nation.

Literature Review

Although there has been a lot of documentation on the Civil Rights movement, there has been little to no studies centered on the SCLC W.O.M.E.N. organization. The women of this establishment have invented important programs that initiated change such as sex trafficking and domestic violence programs, their involvement in Maggie Bozeman's and Julia Wilder's voting rights case and programs that were dedicated to the strengthening black families.

Joseph Lowery and the Resurrection of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference by Deric Gilliard

In this thesis, Gilliard elaborated some of the unrecognized programs that the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. initiated. One of those programs is a mentoring program for young women called "Bridging the Gap: From Girls to Womanhood." The program, which continues to run until this day, connects young girls with mentors that serve as inspirations to them⁹. It also empowers women by teaching computer and personal development skills⁹. Evelyn Lowery also originated the "toy gun exchange" to curb the gun violence and distribution of guns in communities. The idea encouraged children to turn in toy guns for safer, less symbolic toys to discourage violence⁷. The organization promoted a campaign in 1982 called Coalition to Free Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman and Save the Voting Rights Act⁸. They were also able to encourage the involvement of the SCLC organization in this campaign, to increase their support of the activists⁹.

Beside Every Great Man... Is a Great Woman: African American Women of Courage, Intellect, Strength, Beauty & Perseverance by Kitty Pope

Pope's book focuses on African-American women who have remained in the shadows of men, such as Evelyn Gibson Lowery. The book has a chapter dedicated to Mrs. Lowery and her accomplishments. Pope acknowledges Mrs. Lowery's support of her husband, the co-founder of SCLC, Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery, and her participating alongside him in civil rights marches and protests. Due to the sheer volume of her participation, she faced more than her fair share of grievances, which included getting shot and incarcerated multiple times. Pope mentions Mrs. Lowery's preference for non-violence and how she promoted it through her work. She has led numerous programs and committees and has established the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. organization. We have utilized this book as a resource due to its content on Mrs. Lowery's background.

Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-black Power Movement written by **Dorothy Height** was written to be informative and enlightening regarding women's roles as being apart of the SCLC women as well as participating in the Civil Rights Movement. Within this book, Height delivers the truth about the roles of men and women in the movements and what was expected of the two as there is much information contrary to what we have been taught about the movements and their political leaders. From the book, Height discusses how women played a pivotal role in the movement but often receives little recognition for their dedicated participation. Men would attempt to showcase women as being very active and represented in the movement, but according to height, actually felt that the women were

sidetracking the movement's focus on race because of their gendered-related questions. Women were seen as the ones that raised much "fuss" about what they felt were insignificant issues. From the oppression women received, they were often forced to choose between the struggle and fight of being black and being women. Other ideas that Height discusses are that of the true feelings and ideas of prominent men in the Civil rights movement, such as how they initially felt that a peaceful approach was too feminine and how women were accused of emasculating men. This book will benefit and add to our research by giving us a different lense and view of the men and women's roles in these movements. It will also show how valued women were in the Civil Rights movement and what specifically prompted them to separate from the SCLC and create SCLC Women. This book will help to strengthen our study by providing us with a prominent source as the woman who wrote it was apart of the movement and experienced first-hand everything there was to experience.

*This is an ongoing research project in the Honors 3260 course we are currently enrolled in. This submission is a draft and we are still conducting our research.

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