

Fannie Lou Hamer **Human Rights Activist**

Women's Rights · Civil Rights · Economic Justice

Born Fannie Lou Townsend as the youngest of 20 children, and working the fields with her sharecropper parents at the age of six, Fannie Lou married Perry Hamer in 1924. The couple could not have children because without her consent, Hamer was given a complete hysterectomy in 1961.

After adopting two daughters with her husband, Hamer went on to argue against forced sterilizations. In *Walk with Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer*, Kate Clifford Larson writes that Hamer speaking out “forcefully and prophetically against these all-too-common ‘Mississippi appendectomies’ played a role in Hamer’s push for quality health care and affordable clinics throughout the rural south.”¹

Incensed by efforts to deny Blacks the right to vote, Hamer became a SNCC organizer in 1962. Two years later, she co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which was open to all without regard to race. A hopeful 68-member delegation went to the Democratic National Convention (DNC) to argue that the Freedom Party should be recognized as the official delegation. While Hamer was describing incidents of violence and injustice suffered by civil rights activists, including her own experience of a jailhouse beating that left her crippled, to the credentials committee; President Lyndon B. Johnson forced her off the air by scheduling an impromptu news conference. Though television networks cut away from their live convention coverage, Hamer’s speech aired on many evening news programs, garnering the attention of a much larger audience than it would have received had it been broadcast during the day.

When Harry Belafonte sent a small SNCC delegation to Guinea, Africa to exchange ideas with leaders of the African independence movement; Hamer, who had poignantly stated, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired” on national television, was chosen to join John Lewis and 10 others.

By 1968, she was a member of Mississippi’s first integrated delegation to the Democratic National Convention. The reforms that the MFDP fought for and won paved the way for Black presidential hopefuls Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who became the first black woman elected to the House of Representatives in 1968, and Reverend Jesse Jackson, who placed third in his 1984 bid for the Democratic nomination and second in 1988.

Turning her attention to economics with support from Belafonte and other donors, Hamer started a “pig bank” that provided free pigs for Black farmers to breed, raise, and slaughter and founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative by purchasing 640 acres of land that Blacks could own and farm collectively.

In the spirit of Acts 1:8, Hamer “worked to make her not-so-little light shine brightly first at home and then across the country and throughout the world.”²

¹ Kate Clifford Larson, *Walk with Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 48.

² Richard A. Bailey, *No Pawn in the Game: Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi, and the Struggle for Human Rights in Front Porch Republic* (November 14, 2023)

Note: significant portions of information are from Debra Michals, “Fannie Lou Hamer.” National Women’s History Museum. 2017.

www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/fannie-lou-hamer and <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fannie-Lou-Hamer-American-civil-rights-activist>