

Fannie Lou Hamer Short Bio

Excerpt of Keisha N. Blain, *Until I am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America* (Beacon Press, 2021).

Fannie Lou Hamer's story captures the contributions of a Black woman sharecropper with limited formal education and limited material resources—but an all-consuming passion for social justice. Born in Mississippi on October 6, 1917, Hamer was the youngest of twenty children. The granddaughter of enslaved people, Hamer worked as a sharecropper for much of her life. At the tender age of twelve, she concluded her studies at a local schoolhouse so she could help her family meet their growing financial pressures. Still, they remained trapped in poverty—the result of the exploitative nature of the sharecropping system and the violence used to maintain it. Despite her limited material resources and the various challenges she endured as a Black woman living in poverty in Mississippi, Hamer committed herself to making a difference in the lives of others.

Her life changed dramatically in 1962. At age forty-four, she attended a mass meeting at a local church in Sunflower County, Mississippi, organized by activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an interracial civil rights organization. The meeting started her on the path to becoming a voting rights activist. Deeply moved by the words of the young SNCC activists that evening, Hamer learned of her constitutional rights as a citizen of the United States. That year, Hamer became a field secretary for SNCC and worked to assist Black residents in Mississippi with voter registration. In the years to follow, she launched a number of initiatives aimed at expanding voting rights as well as addressing racism and inequality in her community and across the nation. Working alongside SNCC activists, Hamer spearheaded voter education workshops in the South, facilitated voter registration drives, and participated in marches and sit-ins throughout the region. Her efforts to expand voting rights for Black people in the South drew the ire of many, and these incidents went beyond intimidation when Hamer endured a brutal beating in Winona, Mississippi, in 1963, at the local police station. Officers, aided by prisoners, unleashed a brutal beating on Hamer, which left her with permanent scars and physically disabled. In the aftermath of the 1963 Winona beating, Hamer amplified her political work, determined to transform American society through an expansion of Black voting rights.

Hamer's boldness and radical honesty were on full display in August 1964, when she spoke before a televised audience at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She had traveled all the way from Mississippi on behalf

of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)—an organization she helped establish in April 1964 to challenge the all-white Mississippi delegation. Hamer’s televised speech, delivered before millions, addressed two central issues that remain relevant in contemporary Black political discourse: voter suppression and state-sanctioned violence. Those who heard the speech, either in person or on television, were transformed by its power. Hamer set out to touch the lives of everyone she encountered, never turning away a person in need—regardless of their race.

Love for others guided her political activism and provided the impetus for her decision to undertake several initiatives during her lifetime. During the late 1960s, she launched the Freedom Farm Cooperative, a community-based rural project, to tackle poverty in Mississippi and advance economic empowerment. As someone whose life had been deeply affected by hunger and poverty, Hamer envisioned Freedom Farm as a response to the hunger and poverty that ran rampant in Sunflower County. Hamer also continued her national advocacy, including her valuable contributions to the women’s rights movement. In 1971, she joined forces with a diverse group of women, including feminist leader Gloria Steinem and US congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, to establish the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC), with whom she worked to expand women’s political participation at the local, state, and national levels.

On March 14, 1977, several months shy of her sixtieth birthday, Fannie Lou Hamer passed away at the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. She had entered the hospital weeks earlier after learning that her breast cancer had recurred. Her political career was comparatively short—only fifteen years—but immensely impactful. From the moment she joined the civil rights movement at age forty-four to her passing at the age of fifty-nine, Hamer accomplished more than most people manage to accomplish in a lifetime. And she maintained hope that America could one day live up to its promise and its ideals.