

# Introduction

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Introduction The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “ No one shall be held in slavery or servitude”, a statement that was true during the time of slavery as it is now in the time of its abolishment. Slavery is a system under which people are treated as property and are forced to work. Slaves are held against their will from the time of their capture, purchase or birth , and deprived of the right to leave , to refuse to work, or to demand compensation . The slavery system that existed in the British Caribbean was termed Chattel Slavery where slaves were held and treated like cattle , the property of their masters and worked, often to death. The abolition of slavery in the Caribbean was the result of numerous factors in and outside of the region . Despite economic benefits it afforded the individual slaveholder and his country, the brutality of slavery gave rise to resistance. Resistance is grouped into two categories: active and passive . Passive Resistance is the nonviolent resistance to a system and involves acts such as slow working, pretending ignorance and deliberate carelessness to name a few. While Active Resistance however, is more vigorous and has immediate results and included such actions as refusing to engage in copulation with the master, damaging and destroying owner’s property, stealing and the most active of all murder and revolt. Such acts however, were rarer because of the penalties associated with them. Women in Slavery History has made it clear that enslaved women played an important role in the various forms of resistance against slavery similar to that of men. They resisted in ways which were characteristic to them as women as well as utilizing methods practiced by both sex. This is evident where they could and did use periods of childbearing to do the least work and in the common practice of running

away. The African Mother country played a vital role in instilling courage and aggressiveness in the enslaved women that aided in their rebelling spirit. The majority of enslaved women entering the British Caribbean were no younger than 14 and no older than 40 as specified by the traders who wanted ready labor. As a result the thousands of young African girls and women who entered the new World had already been through the African tribal ceremony with an instilled sense of worth and pride that was later passed on to their children and proved a major deterrent to slave-owners. Men were physically stronger than females and could perform more strenuous tasks than women. The enslaved women were therefore in a shorter supply in the slave population and were therefore in great demand thus strengthening her sense of her importance. Women were seen by Olaudah Equiano, , an African writer whose experiences as a slave prompted him to become involved in slavery abolition movement, as being fierce and strong willed and which is a fact that was evident throughout the period of slavery. Herbert Aptheker a noted historian stated that “ to justify slavery ‘ the colossal myth’ of the ‘ sub —humanity’ of black people had to be demonstrated by all black and white alike. To preserve this idea slaves therefore frequently came into conflict with the system". Slave women did not conform to the image created for them by white society and in so doing presented a strong challenge to the slave system and all that it represented. Often this involved breaking the laws of slavery. Women and Passive Resistance Passive resistance was the main type of opposition practiced by the enslaved women of the British Caribbean. Fear of retribution was a strong deterrent for many female slaves but still a larger few rebelled

against the system of enslavement. One planter in St Ann, Jamaica, wrote angrily in his diary, “ I have this day seen as evident wish to get the children with Yaws... under the idea that they will be permitted to sit down and mind their children... I shall certainly allow no time of mine to be lost in their attendance...” Slave women tried to prolong the period they spent nursing their children. A slave mother with a suckling infant was given better treatment by law as they were given extra food allowances and was customarily allowed to turn out to work an hour late, and to leave an hour earlier than other slaves and her baby accompanied her to the field where she took regular intervals off from her labour to feed. This act resulted in enslaved women throughout the West Indies to taking an extraordinarily long time to wean their babies as to avoid the gruesome system of chattel slavery not hesitating to make use of nature’s way of withholding her labour. This caused a major crises in the British Indian economy as by this time women outnumbered men in the slave population and so contributed to the majority of the estate labour force. Of all aspects of African culture which survived the experience of slavery, religion and kinship have proven to be the most enduring . Enslaved women were important to the community in their critical role as child bearers which which also contributed to the free will self- worth among slaves in general. Due to of the egalitarian basis of many West African religions and political systems , black women played important roles in slave religion and ultimately the entire cultural life of the slaves and with the intimate link between culture and resistance, meant that women were therefore deeply entrenched in the general struggle against slavery. Organized resistance was important but it could be disputed that the slave’s

strength laid in the improvement of the slave community which what Herbert Gutman an American professor of history has termed “ a dynamic, adaptive culture which was part of the cumulative slave experience transmitted down generation through families. (Mathurin, 1975) Enslaved women and Active Resistance Active Resistance was considered the most vigorous and the most effective form of resistance that was practiced by the enslaved women of the British Caribbean. Matthew Lewis, a slave master, recounted when the women refused to work on his estate in Jamaica in 1816, “ January 26... It seems that this morning, the women, one and all, refused to carry away the trash.. the mill was obliged to be stopped; and when the driver on that station insisted on their doing their duty, a little fierce young devil of a Miss Whauncia flew at his throat and endeavored to strangle him. ” During the years 1835 to 1835, 311 cases involving slaves came to trial in the parish of Port Royal in Jamaica of which 150 of these cases concerned female slaves. The majority of women were accused and found guilty of either violent conduct, or the use of violent language Women quietly plotted against the property and person of their masters and mistresses in different ways. They perfected the means by which they could do damage without being found out. One of such case was a slave Harriet who was tried in Jamaica, in 1817 for attempting to poison her master’ coffee. Domestic slaves in particular, many of whom were women, and lived at close range to the whites, were the eyes and ears to their counterparts. By eavesdropping on conversations held by the whites, they were able to gather vital information on slave laws and estate matters which could then be used in the resistance. Conclusion The theme of resistance was a part of the enslaved women in the British

Caribbean from the beginning of slavery to the very end. It was expressed in songs and oral traditions and passed down from mother to children . By refusing to accept slavery like dumb animals, by regularly raising their voices, women in their way, forced their presence on the consciousness of many. This was the thin end of the wedge in undermining the system of slavery as once the slave is seen and heard, as a human being, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify his or her existence as chattel. In their reluctance to co-operate, verbally abusing their master and refusing to act obediently, in using their voices in mocking or rebellious singing as well as their contribution in slave revolts, showed much bravery and vigor as they were determined to terminate the system of chattel slavery and gain their liberty and human dignity as any of their male equivalent. Illustration 1:

Slaves working in the sugar fields Illustration 2: Female slaves during the “petticoat rebellion” of 1816. Illustration 3: Punishment meted out to resistant enslaved woman Illustration 4: Enslaved woman being punished References

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