

Women in caribbean history: natural rebels

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



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The years of slavery have been living hell for both enslaved men and women, from the day it begun to its end. They worked under the same conditions, received the same punishment and also rebelled in the same ways most of the time. The women, however, had some unique ways of rebelling against slavery provided by their difference in gender and allocation of tasks, and so they attained the description “ Natural Rebels”. The term “ Natural Rebel” refers to someone in whose nature it is to oppose or defy authority.

Though all the slaves rebelled, the women, however, showed a greater diversity than the men in their quest for freedom. Their acts of rebels took two forms; violent and non violent. One of the women’s non - violent ways of resisting slavery was by faking sicknesses. The women realised that they were allowed to miss a day or two from work when they were sick, they saw this as a means of individual rebellion and took full advantage of it.

Many of the estate records give evidence to show this, for example, in 1796, the manager of Newton’s estate said, “...many of them run, without reason, into the sick house...”, and “ On Wednesday” wrote Matthew Lewis, “ there were thirty invalids, of whom only four cases were at all serious; the rest had a Lilly pain here, Massa’ or ‘ a bad pain me know nowhere, Massa’, and evidently only came to the hospital to sit idle, and chat away the time with their friends.”

But a more fascinating example of this is from Jenny, the girl whose hands were bitten, she was told by the doctors, that having been in the hospital all week; she ought not, for very shame, to go out on Sunday. She answered she wanted to go to the mountains, and go she would. ” “ Then”, said the

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doctors, “ you must not come back again on Monday at least” “ yes” Jenny said, “ she should come back;” and back this morning jenny came. But as her wounds were almost completely well, she had tied packthread around them so as to cut deep into the flesh, had rubbed dirt into them, and, in short, had played with tricks as nearly to produce mortification in one of her fingers. ”

At times the women had refused to work for no reason, without even pretending to be sick. Many of the slaver drivers had described it to be mere laziness. Though these women were reluctant to their work in the fields they were quite hard working in their provision grounds. Some of the enslaved women had made it very clear that they had absolutely no intentions of working, even the administration of stripes on the backs of these women had sometimes failed to produce results and so their masters were left with no other choice but to take them to the slave court.

A perfect example of this is that of a female slave named industry, who was brought up by master before the magistrate of Port Royal, Jamaica, for refusing to work and setting bad example for other negroes on the property by her actions. Another non-violent form of resistance taken on by the women was prolonged lactation. The enslaved women in the West Indies took an extremely long time to wean their babies because of the special treatment they were given during this time.

A slave woman with a suckling infant was by law given extra food allowances and was customarily allowed to turn out to work an hour later, and to leave an hour earlier than other slaves: her baby accompanied her to the field, was tended under the trees by an elderly “ nana”, and she took regular intervals

off from her labour to feed her infant. The women had used this special treatment of theirs as a means of resistance. Other measures taken by the enslaved women to resist slavery a more drastic than those already mentioned.

Some of the women went as far as to what is referred to as “ gynaecological resistance”, this birth control technique, as believed by many of the planters, was use to reduce the flow of labour on the estates. In 1796, manager Wood of Newton’s estate, stated that on of his slave women, Mary Thomas, got pregnant buy a white book-keeper, but he did not consider her to be his favourite, Mary together with her sister and her mother murdered the newborn baby. The enslaved women also had several herbs that they had used to get rid of the baby even before they were born.

They did not jus take revenge on their masters by murdering their children but also but murdering those in close relation to tyrannical authority. In 1768, a black slave woman was convicted for the attempted murder of her master. In the case of domestic slaves, the master’s children often paid the price of the parent’s actions. Other enslaved women took their revenge on their masters by stealing or destroying his property to ruin him financially, as done by “ Nelly, the hackstess, who disappeared in October 1810, the notice placed in the Barbados Mercury for her recapture stated that she took with her ? 100 worth of dry goods - along with her child. ”

Many slaves ran away from the estate on numerous occasions, in Barbados for example, it was said that maroonage was the most commonly reported form of resistance by women. News paper reports, plantation accounts, official documents, traveller’s narratives and some other historical data give <https://assignbuster.com/women-in-caribbean-history-natural-rebels/>

evidence to show that those slave women who did not runaway may have helped other run away. The slave women, in particular had a reputation for harbouring fugitives.

When the slaves ran away from their estate they took refuge in the urban undergrounds, on other estates, or they took shelter in the remote back lands, some of them even attempted to live the island. All slaves by law had to present signed passes or testimonials from their owners as proof to show that they were given permission to travel outside the estate, but some of the women were literate, and so, they faked their own passes, because of this constables were advised to read passes very carefully in case they were counterfeits.

Nancy, for instance ran away with her two mulatto children, it was believed that she had counterfeited the documents need to succeed in this escape. Some of the run away women were able to trick the public into thinking they were free, this was due to the “ good English” and proper way of dress. The habitual runaways were those who had lived up in to their description as “ Natural Rebels”, no matter how many times this slave women were recaptured and matter what punishment they were given, they would still continue to run away from their masters.

They slave masters faired that these women would contaminate the other slaves minds by showing bad examples. There were one such women who was extremely determined to gain her freedom by running away, her name was Quashebah, from Codrington Estate, this women was recaptured on several occasions in the last quarter of the 18th century, in September and December 1775, in January 1777, in August 1778, and her last recapture was <https://assignbuster.com/women-in-caribbean-history-natural-rebels/>

in September 1784. Though most historical records mostly show the role of men in armed revolts, others have shown that there were a few women who have been identified as soldiers or leaders in the post-rebellion order.

Women were almost always present in the creation or development of anti-slavery programmes, for example, the creation of the African-styles Kingdoms, and the establishment of military dictatorships in the late 18th and the early 19th century. In the 1680's several women were tried and executed for their insurrectionist behaviour, of which planter lived in fear. It was reported by Joseph Belgrave, a sugar planter, that after the 1816 rebellion in Barbados the women were in their forefront of insurrectionist behaviour.

A very famous example of this is that which was shown by Nanny Grigg, a creole woman at Simmon's estate, historical data showed that she was a literate woman, who gained knowledge of the successful Haitian rebellion, she was said to believe in the military solution to ending slavery. One of the slaves from this same estate reported before the assembly investigation committee after the rebellion that, " sometime at the last year, he heard negroes were all to be free on New Years Day.

That Nanny Grigg who could read, was the first person who told the slaves at Simmons so; and she said she had read it in the news papers, and that their masters were very uneasy at it; that she was always talking about it to the negroes, and told them that they were damn fools to work, for that she would not, as freedom they were sure to get. That about a fortnight after New Years Day, she said that the negroes were to be freed on Easter Monday, and the only way to get it was to fight for it, otherwise they would

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not get it and the way they was to do, was to set fire, as that was the way they did in St. Domingo. ”

The women put great “ sweat and blood” in their pursuit for freedom, they were determined at not easily discouraged. The term “ Natural rebels” does not seem to be an appropriate description for the enslaved women in the Caribbean. Generally both men and women rebelled in the same ways, though the women were extremely determined, and proved that they would take whatever measures were needed to liberate themselves both physically and psychologically.

There was nothing “ natural” about their rebellion, because these women were pushed to do what they did, had they been treated properly, and had not been denied their freedom they would have not rebelled. The system of slavery degraded women and their womanhood in such ways that it forced them to do the things they did. Women were denied their sensitivity, they were expected to work like a man and undergo punishment like a man, and just like the men, were treated far worse than animals, they were considered to be property and not human beings.

Their mother country, Africa had given them an aggressive military spirit, but it also gave them a sense of importance. As one book stated, it gave them “ a background of great self respect and confidence. ” African girls who entered the “ new world” were between ages 14 and 40, which means they went through the African tribunal ceremony, the ‘ rite de passage”. So those who came were already steeped into the national culture, which trained them to be in control of themselves and their family.

The traditional African marriage was polygamy, which permitted men to have several wives, this gave women the opportunity to develop leadership qualities, but slavery sought to take this away from them. Many of the times when women ran away or murdered their masters or masters children, it was because of the injustice that was done to them. The women were expected to be submissive to whatever came their way on the plantation but it was not in their nature to accept these treatment, and as any other slaves they rebelled.