

Free research paper on gender and labor differences in slavery

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The enslavement of African people is a dark period in American history. It was a system in which individuals were treated as they were property, and of a lesser status, because they were foreign and of a different color. Slavery so profoundly affected the nation and the two colliding cultures that racism still runs deep in America today because of it. Many Americans today brush off the idea of slavery, believe that it is in the past and does not matter.

However, it still matters very much to a large portion of the country, and is still an important part of the country's history. The intricacies of slavery itself, for example, are profound. Even from the perspective of slavery, men and women could not be expected to be treated the same, nor share the same duties. Though there is no way to prove whether male or female slaves were treated worse than one another, slavery itself has been proven an abominable and oppressive institution that impacted each gender greatly, and differently.

Male and female slaves experienced very different lives based on their gender, as well as the labor they were assigned. There were some situations that warranted the same treatment though. Some forms of slavery and labor, according to, " Rice Milling, Gender, and Slave Labour in Colonial South Carolina," were not specific to gender or labor, but only to the idea of slavery itself. Chattel slavery, of course, was not specific to gender or labor . It was the most common form of slavery, also known as " traditional" slavery, wherein individuals were treated as personal property to be bought, sold, and traded as any other good. Markets were held where slaves were shown as one would a horse, or a piece of furniture. The slaves were inspected by prospective buyers, and bids were made based on if neighboring plantation

owners thought the slave was a wise purchase. Bonded slavery was also undefined by gender, though it was sometimes defined by labor. The owner of a plantation were known to fall into debt with other plantation owners. Instead of paying off the debt himself through labor, or by using money, he would promise a slave, bonding the individual to the new plantation owner. Most often, the plantation owner owed money would be allowed to choose what type of slave he would prefer, or the two owners would haggle over which slave would move to his plantation. Being treated like property was a similarity every slave could count on, regardless of gender or plantation duties.

In some cases, the owed plantation owner would request a slave that worked in the house or the field, making the bonded duties labor specific . However, because both genders were able to tend to household duties, and duties outside, bonded slaves were rarely defined by gender unless the owed plantation owner specifically needed a cook or somebody to look after his children or wife. These jobs were typically left to females, as stated in, “ Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present .” Male slaves were rarely trusted around children or white women, though male slave children were sometimes allowed in the home, and left alone in their company. Concerning food, male house slaves sometimes served food, but they rarely helped with its preparation. Aside from the general forms of slavery, there were many distinctions between slaves based on their gender and their labor specific duties.

As previously mentioned the life of a slave was largely based on gender and labor. Though men and women shared many of the same duties on the

plantation grounds and a few within the home, they were treated differently based on their gender, and experienced different things based on their gender. Men, for example, were sometimes feared more than women and consequently, beaten more severely when they disobeyed. Plantation owners believed brute force would help keep male slaves subordinate, a trend that began as early as their initial kidnapping from Africa. When they were initially taken from Africa, black males were feared more than black females were. While the women were sometimes kept above deck, shackled and unshackled, the males were always held in steel shackles, and usually chained below deck. They were often kept there for several weeks at a time .

Even when male slaves began arriving in America, plantation owners were in a constant race to break the male slave's spirit. Whippings were instigated as a form of discipline, but also way to assert power. If the male slave acted wrong or spoke out, they were whipped. The number of whippings was based on the severity, typically, but there were documented instances of men being lashed as many as 150 to 200 times, suggesting plantation owners were mad with power . The whippings were not always because it would make the slave " better" necessarily but because they feared him, and perhaps what he might do if he realized how strong he was. The fear led to more beatings and harsher labor, all in hopes that the male slave would be subdued, that the slavery would crush his spirit. Solomon Northrup's " 12 Years A Slave" retells multiple tales of his beatings. One in particular stands out, in which a white man whips him, demanding Northrup admit he is a slave of Georgia. When he refuses he is beaten with a boat paddle until it

breaks over his body . This, however, proved to be a double-edged sword for plantation owners; while women were coveted for fertility, men were prized for strength and health. Beating and starving them meant they could not be sold . Though many slaves had the same duties, men were regarded as the keepers of the hardest labor. This meant they were tasked with plowing fields, digging irrigation ditches, minding stables, and other physically difficult tasks.

Some men were also lucky enough to learn trades and crafts. The work was still difficult, but not as taxing or dangerous as digging ditches or minding stables. Crafting also afforded slaves the opportunity to avoid beating for no reason in many cases . Men could learn to become blacksmiths, carpenters, or engineers, among other things. Jobs such as these allowed male slaves more opportunities than female slaves, who were often only used in the field, in the home, and to have children . Many slaves who learned these skills were hired by other employers, sometimes even without their plantation owner's knowledge. If the plantation owner knew about their employment, they would be forced to turn over most, if not all of their wages. However, if the plantation owner was unaware, it would be possible for the slave to save his earnings, sometimes plotting an escape or plan to buy back members of his family who had been sold. In some cases, the men could use the wages to buy their own freedom . Women were rarely able to assume this position because they were rarely allowed to learn a craft available for employment. Though work flourished for some, the male slave's personal role as a man in the family was stifled. The traditional roles males held, controlling households and dominance of wives and children, were often taken over by

plantation owners . This male dominated system within the family was based around owning property and goods. Slaves were not allowed to own anything; therefore, the plantation owner was the surrogate “ man of the house.” Feminist theories suggest this later gave females greater credence to destroy the stereotypical framework of ‘ family’ and male dominance, especially during the Civil Rights Movement .

Though this progress is widely thought as a good thing, the subservience forced upon males during slavery also had its downside. Men could not protect their wives, for example. They were constantly at risk of witnessing their wives being beaten, raped, or murdered, without being able to stop it. The humiliation fueled many with rage, and a desire to fight back, but the ones who did were often beaten and murdered themselves. Others were sold to neighboring plantations, separated from their families entirely. Many men attempted to avoid marriage because of the emasculation many faced. Unfortunately, some had no choice in avoiding it; plantation owners could force slaves to marry, and even demand they have children in hopes of breeding stronger, healthier slaves .

It is common knowledge that female slaves were sexually assaulted and raped on a regular basis, partially because their husbands had no recourse to protect them. It is not common knowledge though, that male slaves were also sexually abused. For example, being forced to witness the rape of their wife and daughters without being able to help them for fear of physical punishment, death, or separation, is not only a form of psychological torture, but also sexual abuse . There were also instances noted in, “ The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,” wherein black slaves were

forced to perpetrate sexual acts against others. For instance, one such incident involved a free black woman, captured by a group of white males, and an enslaved black male. The white males ordered the slave to have a sexual encounter with the woman under penalty of physical punishment . He later expressed his deepest sorrows and regrets over his actions, but simply did not want to be beaten. Similar scenarios were perpetrated on black men, though they were forced to commit sexual acts on white women and later hanged for said actions .

The life of a male slave was clearly not easy. Whether defined by labor or general lifestyle, they had much to deal with. Nevertheless, female slaves also had much to deal with during this time. Once again beginning as early as their passage from Africa to America, the differences in gender are evident between slaves. The women were not as intimidating as the men, and often did not travel below deck for long stretches of the journey. In some cases, women were even allowed to about around the deck with loose shackles, or without shackles at all. This luxury is something male slaves never knew . It was a small bit of freedom that was granted at a great cost. Walking freely above deck allowed the women to be easily accessed by sexually driven crewmembers, according to, “ Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery.” “ Ar’n’t I A Woman,” also quotes the rough passages of female slaves, stating, “ they were more easily accessible to the criminal whims and sexual desires of seamen, and few attempts were made to keep the members of slave ships from molesting African women. Life on the boat was, in a word, hell.

This trend of female slaves as an object of lust, desire, and sexual

objectification was to continue: " From the very beginning of a woman's enslavement she had to cope with sexual abuse." Whippings occurred most often because a woman refused the sexual advances of a plantation owner. Most cruelly, sometimes a woman would not be whipped, but her children would be whipped as punishment in order to keep her in line. Plantation owners found it more effective to threaten a woman's children, than to threaten the woman herself; there were several documented instances of children being whipped to death, partially due to size and possibly partially due to malnourishment . Typically though, when a woman was flogged, it was not as many times, or as harshly, as when a man was whipped unless the whipping was done by the plantation owner's wife. In these cases, the whippings were typically found to be equal .

Once the slaves arrive in America and were put up for sale, the most highly desirable female slaves were those of childbearing age who looked healthy. If a woman looked as if she could bear many children without many complications, she was sought after with fervor. Typically, this meant the woman was tall and relatively stout, with wide-set hips and a round belly . During the purchasing process, women were often degraded more than men were. If men appeared healthy, and could prove their strength, they were purchased.

Women, on the other hand, had to be thoroughly examined before a plantation owner would consider purchasing her. Is it suspected these examinations were more in depth than necessary. Plantation owners saw them as entirely necessary though because they saw female slaves as more profitable. A male slave would be able to do more work around the

plantation, but throughout her lifetime, a female slave could produce more children, making up for the hard labor she could not perform. Essentially, plantation owners looked at female slaves as an investment. Despite their ability to repopulate, men were typically more expensive than women, creating an unstable populace on plantations were. In many cases, female slaves were purchases to work, but also purchases to breed with male slaves. Male slaves were essentially used as stud horses to impregnate female slaves. Unfortunately for the female slave, though she was used as an incubator, she was often not allowed to be a traditional mother. Deborah Gray White states, " Slavers separated the black woman from most of what had lent meaning to her life," going on to state that in Africa, women were mothers, but on plantations, they were workers. They had children, and in a traditional sense, they were mothers, but they did not really raise them. Women only made sure their children did not die. Some slaves, like Harriet Jacobs, appeared to be bought purely as sexual objects for their masters. Jacobs notes in her book that before her escape she took to hiding in her plantation owner's attic in an attempt to escape his harassing advances. On top of being forced into sexual slavery, female slaves were also forced into labor bondage. They worked in the fields with male slaves, but also had gender exclusive jobs. They acted as midwives and nurses for other slaves, as well as plantation owner's wives. They were also house cooks and kitchen aids, often overseeing all of the typical duties in the household, such as cleaning and watching the plantation owner's children. Other stereotypical female jobs, such as sewing and delivering food to the plantation slaves also fell to the women. In some cases, female slaves who had just bore children

were also charged with the job of breastfeeding the plantation owner's child .

Female hands also took on gardening duties and became general house servants, doing whatever the plantation owner, his wife, or his children asked of her. The female slave always had two jobs once she became an adult: whatever job she was assigned by her owners, and raising her own children. The task was often seemingly impossible, though a small benefit was offered to slave women if they became pregnant. Pregnant slaves were often treated slightly better than female slaves who were not pregnant. Sometimes mistaken for affection by the plantation owner, typically this display of behavior only meant the owner understood the child was an addition to his assets; to protect the mother was to protect his money . Once the woman was unable to bear children she would be expected to work as her peers until the reported " retirement age" of 65 to 70.

The sexual and physical labor women were forced to endure during slavery was appalling. There were small benefits that afforded them some opportunities based on their work status, setting them apart from males though. Male slaves sometimes learned crafts and left plantations, or were bonded out by plantation owners. This rarely happened with female slaves; they were often completely confined to the plantation. As a result, they learned how to survive the violent, inhumane treatment using an interdependent social network amongst themselves. The connected nature of the women provided a buffer against the dehumanization slavery forced upon them; it reminded them they were a community. The African American sisterhood is still alive and well today in some parts of the culture . Over the

years, this interdependency grew. As slaves were bought and sold to different plantations, they did not forget each other. When slaves began traveling through the Underground Railroad to freedom in the north, it is speculated that the word-of-mouth given by these female networks may have been instrumental in freeing over 300 female slaves . The female slaves were also taught many skills that became vital to the plantation owner and his family, such as delivering babies, nursing, and caring for other slaves.

As the female slaves began to realize that without their part on the plantation, it would crumble, many groups plotted against their owners. For example, female slaves would sometimes administer the wrong healing agent to their owner. There are no documented cases of murder, but it is suspected that in many instances, female slaves kept their owners sick longer than they needed to be . Nurses would also help fellow slaves terminate pregnancies that resulted from rape. Many slaves were raped by their plantation owners, or other members of the family. Unfortunately, rape was very common for a female slave; slaves made few choices about their bodies. Nurses were able to help terminate unwanted pregnancies as a small relief for these helpless women, as well as a small stance of defiance against these unforgivable crimes.

More important than the skills they learned in nursing and midwifery, perhaps most importantly than anything a slave ever learned, was the ability to read. Female slaves were at an advantage when it came to learning how to read because they were forced to work in the house more often than male slaves did. Having the chance to read alone made house labor more

advantageous than plantation labor because statistically, upon being set free, an African American who could read was three times more likely to get a job, thrive, and survive than one who could not . Many of the female slaves who worked in the house began training as house slaves from a very young age. While many plantation owners were hard-hearted, mean, and abusive, some were kind. Wives of plantation owners were also known to be kind, and there are many documented cases of plantation children and slave children playing together as peers until the African American child was old enough to begin learning their chores . Because many children began training for their chores as house slaves from such a young age, it granted them the chance to become close with their owners. If the plantation owner, his wife, or any of the children were receptive to it, sometimes the slave was thought of as a type of relation. In these situations, most often the wives or children, but sometimes the plantation owners themselves, would begin to offer education to slaves in small pieces.

In other cases, such as the case with Frederick Douglass, the slave would gather what they could and teach themselves how to read. With the help of local neighborhood boys who could read, Douglass used newspaper clippings and words written on advertisements around town to teach himself how to read. Many slaves improvised this way in an attempt to begin reading .

Reading, of course, was forbidden for slaves. Plantation owners did not want slaves to learn anything that might obviously be used against them one day. While white children attended classes and became educated, black children learned how to cook, tend the fields, and aid wounds. Nursing became a vital part of the plantation, and without this skill in particular, the plantation

would have fallen apart. Reading, nonetheless, was the most obvious skill that whites did not want slaves to possess. Knowledge, after all, is power, and plantation owners were power hungry. Many slaves were too scared to try learning how to read for fear of the repercussions. Others seemed to understand it was the first of many steps that would help free them from slavery. In most cases, the attempts were from females who began self-teaching before and after their plantation, home chores were finished. It did not earn them any money, as the male slaves craftwork did, but it did afford them the opportunity to teach other slaves and better their future if they reached the north, and freedom.

In sum, slavery was a foul, violent crime perpetrated on the African people based entirely upon white privilege. They were darker skinned than the plantation owners and spoke a different language. They wore less clothing and lived in different styled homes; therefore, they were unworthy of being treated as humans by plantation owners. Instead, they were treated as property, bought and sold like pieces of furniture, but worked like cattle. Slavery was entirely reliant on the fact that Africans were darker than Americans were. However, there are subtle nuances to the lives slaves lived that go beyond skin color. Gender separated slaves and how they were treated as early as the day they left Africa. Men were chained below deck while women roamed free above. Women were sexually harassed more often, though men experienced their fair share of sexual assault. Men were also emasculated, which may have fueled the African American feminist movement that paralleled the Civil Rights Movement. Men were more expensive than women were, but women could bear children, and were seen

as investments. Labor also separated the two groups. Men typically worked the plantation grounds and were sometimes able to learn craft, earn money, and buy their freedom. Women, meanwhile, worked in the women, learned skills like cooking and nursing, sabotaged the plantation owner, and learned to read more often than males and sometimes in secret. Both groups were beaten, murdered, separated from family, forced to marry, starved, and sexually assaulted among many other atrocities. Though gender and labor differences separated the two groups to a degree, it can be agreed that slavery as a whole was a despicable thing to have done.

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