

Enslaved women in the antebellum in the united states essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



Born into a slave family in the year 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, Harriet Jacobs declared the phase of entering into womanhood as a “ sad epoch in the life of a slave girl.” She wrote one of the famous works, the “ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.” Historians during the period of antebellum documented that the racial and gender ideologies strengthened the chattel slavery, which led to the vulnerability of enslaved women, such as Jacobs to sexual exploitation and harassment. Being a slave in the free society, black in the white society and woman in a masculine society made enslaved women the most vulnerable group in the Antebellum South. Enslaved women in the Antebellum were among the poorest of all the working women and inferior race of the society.

Domestic servants like Harriet Jacobs spent long working hours in the company of men. Whippings, torture, imprisonment and mutilation were the common punishment faced by the enslaved women. Slavery was a highly explosive issue in the antebellum period due to the rapid expansion of the United States. The Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive State Act and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 led to several confrontations between the pro and anti-slavery settlers, in which women were the main sufferers. Enslaved women were a property, which meant their bodies were a commodity that to be bought, sold or used according to the owner’s desire. In her work, Jacobs mentions about her master Flint, who compelled her to fulfill his sexual desire. There were no laws that protected the enslaved women from abuse and harassment.

Between 1700 and the Civil War, there were no convictions against white men for the way they treated and tortured enslaved women. Jacobs used

euphemisms to describe her sexual abuse. Slave owners forcefully married slave women to slave men with the belief that married slaves less likely run away. Slave marriages were fragile as the women had no interest in the men whom they married. Marriage and slavery were incompatible institutions. The central responsibility of enslaved women was reproduction. While other slave societies in the United States relied on the import of slaves, a majority of slaves in the antebellum south were native-born. The slave owners insisted the enslaved women to bear a child as they can use the child as a slave in the future. The colonies of the south adopted the principle of “*partus sequitur ventrem*,” by which the children took the place of their mothers regardless of the identity of their fathers.

There was a general perception among the slave communities that enslaved women in the household received better treatment than enslaved women in the plantations. However, the abuse and harassment faced by the enslaved women was the same irrespective of the location of work. Harriet Jacobs reflected on her experiences that if an enslaved woman was beautiful, it was the greatest curse bestowed upon her as it only hastened the degradation of women. The emotional and psychological consequences of sexual exploitation were a significant factor in the decision making of the enslaved women. Harriet Jacobs argued that slavery made it impossible for her to hold on to her virtue. The enslaved women also withstood the pressure of keeping their families together and avoiding the physical pain of flogging. For the enslaved women, the antebellum period was a trauma of sexual exploitation.