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CHAPTER THREE

Gender Ratios and Caribbean Slavery

During the eighteenth century sugar surpassed other forms of commodity production in the West Indies in profit making and area cultivated. Tobacco, coffee, cotton, and various spices were grown on small islands and in isolated regions of major sugar producers, but sugar ruled (Williams 1966). Sugar production on large estates and plantations spread throughout the Caribbean, driven in part by inefficient cultivation techniques and the search for new, fresh soils. By the mid-nineteenth century the areas from Brazil northward to Surinam and British Guiana through the West Indies and northwest into British Honduras had become centers of production of commodities for export, primarily sugar.

Imperial stewardship diminished in significance as large-scale sugar production became more competitive and uniform (Beckford 1972). Sixteenth-through nineteenth-century Caribbean history is replete with wars and skirmishes among colonial powers for access to these remarkably productive lands. But over time shifting imperial policies had relatively little impact on slaveholding or on the economic fortunes and social organization of plantations.

Slavery supplanted all other labor systems, most notably indenture. Africans constituted the principal worker pool. Europeans were relatively few in number and less adaptable to strenuous forced labor in New World climates than Africans or indigenous peoples. The native Caribs and Arawaks resisted European conquest and were in most areas eradicated. Finally, plantation size grew and labor forces increased. Slaves became more valuable and productive. And more dimensions of slave life, from housing to cooking and child care, were collectivized. Slaves were progressively subjected to routinized and rigorous work schemes and made socially bondless with the rending of kinship ties. Women progressively lost control of economic activities that had given them status and power.

Mintz (1978, p. 85) offers a period schema for West Indian slave societies that encapsulates these transitions. First, from ca. 1500 to 1580 the Spanish introduced the cultivation of sugar cane to much of the Greater Antilles, utilizing enslaved aborigines and Africans. From ca. 1640 to 1670 British and French states and entrepreneurs entered the Lesser Antilles, enslaving indigenous peoples and using the labor of African slaves and indentured
Europeans. The Dutch and then the Danes followed similar patterns of colonization and exploitation of land and enslaved labor in the Virgin Islands.

In the third stage, the apogee of Caribbean sugar planting (ca. 1670–1770), British and French planters dominated the region’s production and used African slave labor exclusively in the cultivation of sugar. Unprecedented labor productivity and output were achieved by slave labor in English Jamaica after 1655 and in French Saint Domingue after 1697. Finally, from ca. 1770 to 1870 Hispanic sugar producers reached new levels of output, principally in Cuba, with mixes of “enslaved, ‘contracted’ and coerced labor” (Mintz 1978, p. 85). Puerto Rico experienced a similar if less successful sugar boom, as did British Guiana and Trinidad, and, largely with indentured East Indian labor, Dutch Surinam.

Curtin’s (1969) chronology lays the groundwork for discussion of demographic change within each sugar-producing society. Slave imports grew, with unequal gender ratios contributing to a natural population decrease. The labor exploitation associated with achievement of full production in much of the region also fostered population loss. Finally, declining production and profits altered the character of slave imports, now for replacement only. The Creole population then grew, gender ratios fell, and the gap between births and deaths narrowed.

Planters generally expressed a preference for male slaves, who were more readily available than females. This pattern was least pronounced in the period from 1500 to 1580, but roughly equal gender ratios are found for the seventeenth century as well. By the third stage, the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the numerical predominance of males was well established and continued for areas then commencing slave-based sugar production. Finally, throughout the region increased local births and the purchase of females changed gender ratios and signaled a decline in production.

**How Many Women?**

There is virtually no task in Caribbean commodity production not at some time carried out by female slaves. Indeed, in the declining years of sugar production women generally outnumbered men and sometimes, with older slaves and children, achieved at least as high levels of per capita labor productivity as earlier generations of young, robust males (Higman 1976a; Klein 1978). Women had a prominent place in African slavery, with slaves used in domestic service and incorporated into lineages (Klein 1986, p. 13; Robertson and Klein 1983). Yet women slaves were often scarce in the Caribbean. Their participation in agriculture and related domestic tasks followed a pattern shaped by the shifting world economy and the peculiar ideologies of colonial powers.
There is little in the historical record to prove that African men and women reached the Caribbean in equal numbers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But several data are suggestive. Most Caribbean commodity planting began on a small scale with slaves employed in a variety of agricultural tasks, often involving the resident slaveholder. This general pattern prevailed well into the late 1700s for Cuba, British Guiana, Surinam, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad. Puerto Rico, for example, had a nearly equal number of male and female slaves in 1821, along with an extremely large cohort of children under age 10 (Turnbull 1840, p. 558; Flinter 1834, p. 213; Baralt 1981, p. 79). Moreno Franginals (1978, p. 38) argues as well that Cuba's slave gender ratio was nearly equal in the early 1800s. And Trinidad in 1779 had only slightly fewer females than males, with 5,396 boys and men counted island-wide and 4,613 girls and women (Millette 1970, Table 1).

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caribbean societies also had a large number of women, although we are dependent on the observations of visitors and records from single plantations for information. Richard Ligon (1657, p. 47), an early European visitor to Barbados, noted that many male slaves had two or three wives. Thomas Atwood (1791) made the same observation about late eighteenth-century Dominica. This pattern of conjugal organization is consistent historically with gender ratios approaching equality or with a preponderance of women, although polygamy was sometimes found in Caribbean slave societies where men clearly outnumbered women (see, for example, Carmichael 1834, vol. 1, p. 298). Europeans also had a tendency to call polygamous what were in fact multiple casual unions (Bennett 1958, p. 35). Of 992 slaves in Montserrat in 1678, 292 were children (Fergus 1975, p. 16). In the late eighteenth century French West Indian slaves married, raised children, and enjoyed feasts for children's baptisms and marriages provided by masters (Peytraud 1973, p. 207; Gautier 1985). Again, these phenomena are compatible with ratios of equality. Firmer evidence of low gender ratios for early Caribbean slavery comes from Bermuda, where 1721 census figures show that the number of slave men and boys nearly equaled slave women and girls (Packwood 1975, p. 74).

Apparent numerical equality of male and female slaves changed everywhere with the intensification and expansion of monoculture, thus departing from U.S. slave history in a fundamental way. Slaveholders in North America continued to purchase female slaves and to encourage conjugal families. More important, the United States ceased purchasing slaves earlier. During the 1700s and into the 1800s, a majority of the slave population in the British and French West Indies was born in Africa; as late as 1800, 25 percent had recently arrived from Africa. The native-born population constituted a majority of U.S. slaves as early as 1680 (Fogel and Engerman 1974, p. 23). This “creolization” of the U.S. slave population led to its feminization.
West Indian slave owners continued to seek young male slaves. As a result, the ratio of male to female slaves changed, often dramatically. For the British and Spanish West Indies, contemporary observers estimated that about one-third of slaves were female in the mid-eighteenth century (Edwards 1966, vol. 2, p. 138; Humboldt 1960, p. 188). An example from arriving slave ships to Cuba supports a nearly 4:1 male to female ratio: from 1763 to 1765 La Real Compañía delivered 3,983 men and boys and 1,054 women and girls (Marrero 1983, p. 6). Craton (1977, p. 72) contends that among slaves on trading ships to the British West Indies, 60 percent were male, suggesting a slightly more equitable gender distribution. Records for British trade from 1791 to 1798 indicate that females made up 38 percent of the 83,000 slaves taken from the entire western African coastal region (Klein 1983, p. 30).

A similar range of percentages is found for trade to other Caribbean slave societies. The roster of a slave ship reaching St. Thomas in the eighteenth century listed twice as many men as women (Westergaard 1917, p. 140). From 1779 to 1789, 49 Danish ships left the Guinea coast with 15,000 slaves, 36 percent of whom were female. The gender ratio among children was 145 boys for every 100 girls. Similar findings are available for the Dutch trade: About 38 percent of slaves traded at the turn of the eighteenth century were women. Among the children, there were 193 boys for every 100 girls (Klein 1978, p. 30). Among slave imports to Surinam until 1735, more than 70 percent were male (Price 1976, p. 12). More than twice as many male as female slaves were imported to the French West Indies (Nicholls 1985, p. 122), with perhaps two-thirds of a ship's slaves being male in the 1740s (Gautier 1985, p. 80).

More extreme gender imbalances in the slave trade and general population are reported for particular settings. Perhaps no more than 5 percent of slaves in Saint Domingue were female in the eighteenth century (Debien 1974, p. 366). Geggus (1978, p. 7) argues, however, that masters exaggerated the scarcity of females to deflect attention from more fundamental causes for the low birth rate, causes such as undernourishment and overwork. On the other hand, by the late eighteenth century many males had left the plantations to join Maroon and other insurgent groups (Nicholls 1985, p. 122). Moreno Fraginals (1978, pp. 42, 87) estimates that, as the Cuban sugar boom began, from 1790 to the 1820s, 76 percent of imported slaves were male; at the same time males constituted nearly 85 percent of slaves on sugar and coffee plantations (see also Deerr 1949-1950, p. 277). Some Cuban plantations had no female slaves (G. Hall 1971, p. 27; Bremer 1853, vol. 2, p. 334; Gurney 1840, p. 160).

Maleness was not enough, of course. Youth was perhaps more valuable to slaveholders. The incredible achievement of Caribbean slave societies, especially the greatly productive late eighteenth-century Jamaica, Cuba, and Saint
Domingue, was to amass an almost wholly productive population.\(^5\) Moreno Fraginals’s description of nineteenth-century Cuba is telling:

In short, the plantations of the time were prison-like places, virtually without women (only 10.23 percent), children (8.15 percent), or old people (3.13 percent). They were sugar-producing jails in which there were no family relations and in which there would be recurrent outbreaks of aberrant sexual behavior. The maintenance of a plantation economy based on a demographic structure of this nature demanded the free and unlimited entry of slaves. (Moreno Fraginals 1977, p. 192)

This productivity yielded immense profits and for slave masters finally confounded demographic conditions. Recent commentary, influenced by Williams’s presentation of the internal contradictions of slave-based commodity planting under the aegis of mercantile capitalism, emphasizes the belief among slaveholders that young male slaves were more productive than other categories of workers and thus highly desired. And, it is suggested, this rapid utilization of highly productive workers was compatible with the “get rich quick” mentality of international mercantile capitalism (Williams 1966; Craton 1974; Moreno Fraginals 1978).

Although this approach provides an outline for explanation, it is not sufficient for our understanding of young males’ predominance among late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Caribbean slaves. Exceptions to general demographic patterns suggest that seemingly feeble categories of workers were as productive, or nearly so, as young males (Higman 1976a; Moreno Fraginals 1978; Dunn 1977). Certainly they were often as numerous, as Caribbean planters surely observed. For example, two Jamaican estates belonging to Richard Beckford varied widely in gender ratio in 1756: Hartford Pen had 41 slaves—24 men, 6 women, 8 boys, and 3 girls—although Beckford’s larger Roaring River estate had 92 women and 36 girls, almost equaling the number of men (84) and boys (43) (Sheridan 1964, pp. 48-50). On Saint Domingue, at la Sucreerie Bouge in the parish of la Croix-des-Bouquets, a 1796 inventory reveals 37 men, 52 women, 21 boys, and 21 girls. In 1768 at the larger Beaulieu plantation in Citronniers à Léogane, of 141 slaves 87 were male and 54 female (Debien 1974, pp. 95, 137).

Even Cuba offers exceptions to the rule that males predominated strongly among Caribbean slaves in the eighteenth century. On Arango y Parreño’s model estate, La Ninja, 180 men and 160 women shared nearly all tasks in the cultivation and processing of sugar. Of 71 cane cutters, 69 were female (Moreno Franginals 1978, p. 17). More typically we find many Cuban estates where, although men significantly outnumbered women, female slaves were numerous. Turnbull (1840, pp. 285-288) recorded visits to two such Cuban
estates: Santa Ana, with 90 slaves, including 30 women, and La Pita, where 48 women were found among 161 slaves.

Lacking comparable data, we cannot claim the value of these women as workers or that of younger and older slaves. But the frequent historical exceptions to the conventional understanding of the superiority of male workers in strength and number are suggestive. Moreover, low gender ratios in the United States and the apparent success of North American plantation agriculture mean that purely materialist arguments are insufficient, as is the proposition that slave masters understood labor needs—rightly or wrongly—in materialist terms. Finally, there is scattered testimony to women's superiority as workers that undermines the supposition that men were more able or more generally preferred (Klein 1983, p. 34). Bryan Edwards, writing in 1819 (1966, vol. 2, p. 88), claimed that West Indian planters found Eboe females better workers than their male counterparts. Ortiz (1975, p. 198) suggests that Cuban planters considered women to be of "more constancy and strength in work than men."

Relative slave prices raise further questions about why males so often outnumbered female slaves on West Indian plantations. The price of slaves in the British West Indies differed relatively little for males and females, rarely more than £10. There was apparently only minor variation in this pattern over time. Ligon (1657, p. 46) noted that males in Barbados were valued at £30, women at £25–27. By 1789 male and female field slaves were priced at £80–100, imported slaves, £50 (Watson 1975, p. 139). Galenson (1982, pp. 502–503) found that from 1673 to 1723 female slaves were valued at about 85 percent of male slaves at auction markets in Barbados. The price gap between male and female slaves closed as the overall quality of bondmen declined. Edwards (1966, vol. 2, p. 154) claimed that in the British West Indies the price was £50 for an "able man in prime," £49 for an "able woman"; £47 for a young man, £46 for a young woman; and £40–45 for a boy or girl. 6

For the French West Indies data on male and female slave prices are scant. Debien (1962, p. 18) cites records from a Saint Domingue plantation where men were valued, on average, at 2,166 livres and women at 1,875 livres; girls, priced at 947 livres, were more valuable than boys, who sold for an average price of 771 livres. Males and females were also sold for about the same price in the slave market in Danish St. Thomas in the eighteenth century (Westergaard 1917, p. 140). 7 The major exception to the claim that male and female slaves were nearly equally valued comes from the Spanish West Indies. There women slaves were consistently sold at about one-third the price of male slaves in the late 1770s and the 1800s (Moreno Fraginals, 1978, p. 191; G. Hall 1971).

The argument for young male superiority in agricultural production to explain planter preference for males is acceptable—although not sufficient—
for those settings in which prices of male and females were nearly equal. In the Spanish West Indies, however, particularly in Cuba, females could be purchased for much less than males, and slaves were rabidly sought. The relative absence of females under these circumstances makes it doubtful that planters’ perception of male capability alone explains the predominance of bondmen. Why were women not more readily procured in the Spanish West Indies?

Two explanations are common and complement one another. First, the short-term profit-making goals of Caribbean sugar production are supported by the materialist approach, calling attention to male productivity, and best represented in the path-breaking work of Moreno Fraginals (1978). He has argued that Cuba’s late eighteenth-century drive to compete against other Caribbean sugar producers brought unprecedented exploitation of slaves and a strong conviction among slaveholders that incremental differences in productivity among age and gender cohorts made the difference in overall production. The price of women slaves was low simply because there was little demand for them.  

Several early commentators explained the relative absence of women slaves in other ways. Bryan Edwards (1966, vol. 2, p. 134) reported the findings of the British Committee Council in 1789 that few women were available for purchase. Four factors influenced slave traders to procure men, according to Edwards: (1) African polygamy, discouraging the sale of women; (2) the growing number of male criminals, punished by sale into international slavery; (3) retention of women slaves as wives; and (4) the presumption that only young women had the needed strength for field work.  

Saco (1893, p. 38) proposed that Spanish West Indian planters and traders were influenced by the facility of acquiring male slaves and the belief that the slave trade would soon end. Slave owners and traders also found males to be stronger and females too often disabled by childbirth, pregnancy, and child care. Finally, Saco claimed, Spanish religious and moral opinion held that the presence of slave women on estates would lead to unsanctioned unions and free sexuality. The last factor is accepted by others seeking to explain women’s relative scarcity among Cuban slaves (see, for example, Corwin 1967, p. 15). Humboldt (1960, p. 88) summarizes the position this way: “Until the last years of the eighteenth century, female slaves were extraordinarily few on the sugar plantations, and most amazing is a concern based on ‘religious scruples’, opposing the introduction of females who cost in Havana less than males, and forcing the slaves to celibacy to avoid moral disorder.” Such moralistic attitudes seem absurd in a highly immoral slave society. But it has been argued by Klein, Tannenbaum, and others that the Catholic influence differentiated Spanish treatment of slaves from the French and British. For example, clerics and religious leaders, trying to rationalize slavery, more often provided religious training for slaves than did British churches. Spanish
priests frequently performed marriages of slaves in Puerto Rico and Cuba; marriage among slaves was illegal or the sanctioning of such marriages forbidden by the church in most of the rest of the region.

The foundation of this approach is that the Spanish slave laws, rooted in the Justinian codes and dating from the fifteenth century, respected slaves’ individual rights, including the salvation of their souls (Klein 1967, p. 57). These concerns were blocked by planters as the Cuban sugar boom progressed and material interests finally overwhelmed ideological ones. Nevertheless, discussion of women’s place and the number of women in slave societies provides some support for Tannenbaum’s and Klein’s positions.

The relative supply of male and female slaves may finally be most damaging to the materialist argument for why men prevailed among West Indian slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Were women available to European traders for sale in the West Indies?

There is some fragmentary evidence supporting Edwards’s argument that African polygyny required a surplus of women, whether slave or free. Klein (1983) used Curtin’s figures on internal prices of women slaves to suggest that they were more highly valued by Africans or that the limited supply of women available for foreign trade drove up their price. “Thus, it has been suggested that the role of women in the economy and society gave them higher value, especially as slaves, than men. In contrast, it has been suggested that male slaves were not easily absorbed into the local labor systems, and thus represented a potential threat in terms of access to women and arms” (Klein 1983, p. 36). Regional variation and local stratification may have further complicated the picture. Geggus (1978, p. 23) found evidence of few women from areas far from the African coast, the number increasing with proximity to coastal trading centers. “Traders transporting slaves from the interior may have concentrated on the higher priced males, while on the coast, in order to make up the cargoes demanded, the local peoples were raided less selectively.” Geggus speculates further that in areas of intense slave trading, such as the African coast, leaders may have kept down the supply of salable males to drive up their prices.

Reasonable doubts have been raised, then, that male strength was the key to male predominance among Caribbean slaves. And perhaps nothing raises such serious doubt about the strength argument as a shift in the gender ratio precisely when productivity needs were most profound.

**Changing Gender Ratios, Changing Labor Supply**

Caribbean slave gender ratios shifted markedly twice. Commodity producers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries probably purchased male and female slaves in roughly equal numbers. This likely gender balance was
disrupted and male slaves favored in the eighteenth century as commodity production spread and intensified. Another dramatic population change occurred in the early 1800s. The British abolished the slave trade in 1807, and other European nations followed suit through the first half of the nineteenth century. Caribbean slave populations matured, bringing about gender ratios approaching equality for many settings and the eventual prevalence of female slaves.

Increased competition for available slaves before the abolition of the slave trade meant that fewer slaves were purchased by Caribbean slaveholders. Creole slaves generally had higher rates of fertility and lower mortality than Africans, contributing to a greater number of women (Higman 1984). Up to 50 percent of Africans perished in passage to the New World or during their first years there (Dirks 1978, p. 148). Africans made up a declining proportion of Caribbean slaves in most established sugar-producing societies through the eighteenth century: 6 percent of the total Jamaican slave population was imported in 1700, 5 percent in 1740, 4 percent in 1780, and none in 1808 (Craton 1971, p. 17). In Cuba African males made up nearly 80 percent of slaves from 1746 to 1790 but only 31.69 percent from 1845 to 1868, with African females constituting 8.51 percent of slaves from 1746 to 1790 and 21.29 percent of slaves in the 1845–1868 period (Moreno Fraginals 1977, pp. 191–193). Females also lived longer, often by 5 percent (see, for example, Craton 1977, p. 75; Dunn 1987, p. 813). Even when males generally predominated in the French West Indies, female slaves followed the African pattern and outnumbered males among slaves older than 60 years (Debien 1974, p. 342).

It is commonly assumed that women’s longevity resulted from a capacity to endure, an explanation commonly used for women’s comparative longevity in the twentieth century. Dunn’s (1977, p. 45) description and commentary on a Jamaican estate mirrors this accepted view: “At Mesopotamia, as was generally the case on West Indian estates, the females proved tougher than the males and better able to survive the trauma of slavery.” Diseases more common to women appear to have been less often lethal than those suffered by men (Sheridan 1985, p. 186). Siguret (1968, p. 223) speculates that higher female life expectancy may reflect relative pressure for productivity on male slaves with an increased proportion of female slaves, so that “feminization and creolization accompany male mortality.”

Women’s relative strength and working capacity were substantial, but, as Siguret implies, ambiguity surrounds the relative contributions of female physical advantage and greater male labor productivity to the age gap. Scattered data support conflicting viewpoints. For example, in the 1870s mortality rates for Puerto Rican female slaves under 45 years of age were greater than for males; after the age of 45 years, male mortality surpassed that of females. “These data suggest that . . . male slaves fared better than females
during their most productive years. However, the females who survived the first 45 years of life were more likely to survive through the next 15 years than the males slaves of their cohort" (Wessman 1980, p. 284). Geggus's (1978, p. 29) findings for slaves in Saint Domingue a century earlier suggest the opposite. There gender was the most important determinant of slaves' health. Sick females were disproportionately 50 years of age or older, whereas ailing males were younger. It may also have been the case that many more girl than boy slaves were born and/or survived the first days of life. Roberts (1977, p. 155) found that gender ratios at birth were lower among Caribbean slaves, at 102 or 103 males for every 100 females, than for contemporary European populations, with gender ratios at birth of 105 or 106 males for every 100 females.

With fewer males available in the slave trade, female slaves were increasingly sold to West Indian estate owners. In Cuba, for example, only two women were imported for every ten men in the eighteenth century. By the 1823 to 1844 period, half of African slaves brought to Cuba through international and interisland trade were female (Moreno Fraginals 1977, p. 87; Kiple 1976, p. 44). French West Indian planters also purchased many African women at the turn of the century (Debien 1974, p. 353). In the 1850s younger slaves were purchased (Craton 1974, p. 124), with children imported to Cuba in massive numbers (Moreno Fraginals 1978, p. 11; Bremer 1853, vol. 2, p. 352; Gurney 1840, p. 162).

The tendencies toward creolization of the slave population and the increased purchase of women dovetailed with a worry among Caribbean planters that slaves had failed to reproduce themselves throughout the region, a serious issue as abolition of the slave trade became imminent. Low fertility among slaves had been a continuing issue for some political interests, expressed in slave codes and other laws from early in the history of West Indian sugar planting. The British slave codes of 1696 required importation of an equal number of male and female slaves to encourage reproduction (Roberts 1957, p. 232). In Cuba concern about gender ratios was expressed as early as 1795 (Humboldt 1960, p. 188). The Cédula of 1798 ordered Cuban planters with only male slaves to buy females. The Royal Decree of 1804 offered a twelve-year extension of the slave trade to the Spanish and a six-year extension to foreigners, with the proviso that slave women be introduced (Corwin 1967, p. 15). Incentives were occasionally offered for the purchase or retention of women. For the Netherlands a royal decree called "for a cessation of the annual head tax on women, but doubled it for men" (Lewiohn 1970, p. 195). In 1792 import duties and the annual head tax on female field slaves in Danish St. John, St. Thomas, and St. Croix were also abolished to increase the population of slave women (Olwig 1985, p. 28).

The shifting slave gender ratios are most fully and accurately reported for the British West Indies, after the mandatory slave registration of the early
Table 3.1. Basic Demographic Indexes for Early Nineteenth-Century Bahamas, Montserrat, Antigua, Nevis, St. Christopher, Barbados, and Jamaica

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Island</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Total Slave Population</th>
<th>Males per 100 Females</th>
<th>Births per 1,000</th>
<th>Deaths per 1,000</th>
<th>Natural Increase per 1,000</th>
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<td>40.2</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1826-29</td>
<td>81,227</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1829-32</td>
<td>81,701</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>1817-20</td>
<td>344,266</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1820-23</td>
<td>339,318</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1823-26</td>
<td>333,686</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>25.1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1826-29</td>
<td>326,770</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>-3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1829-32</td>
<td>317,649</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
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</table>


1800s. Table 3.1 reveals that a slight preponderance of female slaves had already come about in most cases. This trend began earlier in some plantations and slave societies than in others. The gender ratio in Barbados began to even out as early as the 1750s, although at the Codrington estates, for which we have extensive records, the genders did not become equal in number until the last third of the 1700s (Watson 1975, p. 130; Bennett 1958, p. 35). Males continued to outnumber females in St. Kitts as late as 1788, but in Nevis the gender ratio was 5 females for every 4 males, and on Montserrat
there were probably more women than men (Goveia 1965, p. 124). On the small Devlin estate in Montserrat in 1726, 16 male slaves, valued at from £15 to £40, and 17 females, worth from £10 to £40, were listed. Their total values differed little, with males' worth accumulating to £475, and females to £477 (Fergus 1975, p. 18). In the British Virgin Islands in 1724 women constituted about half of slaves; by 1756 they were nearly 55 percent (Dookhan 1975, p. 28).

An Assembly of Jamaica committee revealed in a 1788 report that the gender ratio among imported slaves was 5 males for every 3 females. Jamaica's gender ratio began to decline in the early nineteenth century, favoring women by 1820 (Higman 1976a, p. 207). Phillips's (1949, p. 8) examination of records from the 1790s for Jamaica's Spring Garden estate reveals a nearly equal gender ratio, with 284 men and 244 women. Dunn (1977, p. 46) reports that at Jamaica's Mesopotamia, males greatly outnumbered females, with a ratio of 148 males for every 100 females; the ratio changed to 88 male slaves for every 100 females by 1818. Surinam's Catharina Sophia estate of 500 slaves achieved a low gender ratio only in the mid-nineteenth century. Gautier (1985, p. 105) reports these gender ratios for the French West Indies in the 1750s: 100, or an equal number of males and females in Martinique; 148 males for every 100 females in Saint Domingue; and 112 males for every 100 females in Guadeloupe. Debien's (1962, p. 18) analysis of prices from one plantation in Saint Domingue shows that girls were more highly valued than boys, although adult men still outpriced adult women. On plantations under British control on the eve of Saint Domingue's revolution, males continued to outnumber females, by a ratio of almost 2 to 1, but, as noted, many more males than females had fled estates (Geggus 1978, pp. 6-7). Men also prevailed in number only slightly at l'Anse-à-l'Ane (Debien 1960, p. 37).

In the Spanish West Indies gender ratios shifted later, reflecting the late commitment of planters there to large-scale sugar planting. Starting in the 1830s at least half of new Cuban slaves were female (Moreno Fraginals 1977, pp. 191-193). In Puerto Rico, in San Germán jurisdiction, the gender ratio remained at 109.7 males for every 100 females as late as 1872, but there were more males where slaves were fewer, a probable indication of a preference for males as skilled workers on small farms and firms (Wessman 1980, p. 279). At Puerto Rico's Ponce market the prices of both slave men and women field hands increased after 1845. Creole male slaves outnumbered females in Ponce, with the gender ratio most skewed among slaves aged 15 to 20 (Scarano 1984, pp. 133, 142). The same pattern is found for British Trinidad and areas of what would later be British Guiana. These last major British Caribbean sugar producers continued to import many slaves until abolition of the slave trade. By the period 1841-1844 males still outnumbered females in Trinidad, Demerara, and Essequibo (Roberts 1977, pp. 154-155).
The importation of young slaves and females had, however, only a limited impact on population growth and stabilization. With the termination of the slave trade, planters at most hoped for a period of high births that would ensure some future population replacement. But closed and generally subfecund Caribbean slave populations could reproduce themselves only as a result of effective pro-natalist state and plantation policies. Caribbean planters generally failed to institute such measures. The importation of a large number of slave women hence brought about their frequent numerical superiority in an “aging and wasting” population (Craton 1978, p. 329; Klein 1986).

Too Few, Too Many: Paradoxes of Gender Ratio in Caribbean Slavery

Many theories have been posited about how gender ratios influence social life. Guttentag and Secord (1983) contend, for example, that a majority of males or females can work to the gender’s advantage only when structural circumstances are favorable. Otherwise the gender loses power and social status. Hence, they argue, the long-standing surplus of American black women renders them less powerful than black men. In a similar manner, medieval women gained social ground when high sex ratios were common but lost position when in the late Middle Ages they numerically surpassed men. Guttentag and Secord postulate further that where males hold structural power, their scarcity yields sexual permissiveness, accompanied by traditional gender role ideologies. A scarcity of females in these circumstances results in the rigid gender hierarchy and morality associated with agrarian societies.

Caribbean slavery conforms to neither scenario. Males predominated socially and economically, if less so than in other agrarian settings. When there were more males, in the eighteenth century, nuclear families were proportionately no more or less common than at other times; nor were they less so when women became the majority. Nor did fertility or gender division of labor vary, as one might expect with changing gender ratios.

Guttentag and Secord (1983) present an intuitively sensible idea, true in many cases. Its lack of fit with Caribbean slavery illustrates, however, the strength of authority relations in these social formations. Although not immutable or entirely unique, social relations in Caribbean slavery made difficult certain forms of social and cultural organization, for example, nuclear families, and in this sense transformed gender ratios into grounds for demographic possibility rather than probability.

Potential relationships and trends formed around a cycle of numerical equality of genders, male superiority in number, and female abundance. This pattern reflects supply and demand factors as well as differing male and female mortality rates. There is, however, surprising uniformity in changing sex
ratios across colonial domains and within stages of sugar production, technical development, and productivity. The major exception is the Spanish West Indies, where the continued scarcity of female slaves and their low price suggest that Spanish religious and moral ideologies were more influential than materialist studies have recently held. The study of women slaves reveals that earlier hypotheses about comparative treatment, offered by Tannenbaum, Klein, and others, remain useful in at least this respect. It also suggests that ignoring gender makes impossible a full assessment of theory about slavery and a reconstruction of more informative perspectives.