Slave Women in the New World

Morrissey, Marietta

Published by University Press of Kansas

Morrissey, Marietta.
Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84007

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2882276
In an agrarian setting "labor" is a reified notion; slaves did little that was not work. Males and females conducted material life for most of their waking hours. I describe the scope of slaves' work by treating separately, but as labor, slaves' production directly for the master—in the fields, as domestics, and as artisans—and what they produced for themselves but implicitly for the master—their houses, clothes, and food.

This division contrasts the exigencies of slaves' household economies and the plantation. Home-based production contributed to the success of estates but, especially for the gardening and marketing of provisions, rendered some power, status, and income to slaves. Most other forms of labor had no direct economic or social benefit for bondmen and women. As I argued earlier, slaves were not purely property, bondless, or proletarianized. A key to their status within the slave community and in relation to whites was their independent economic power, never substantial but often effective.

The "household economy" has received attention in at least three academic circles. Comparative sociologists and historians have studied the changing organization and functions of the family in European industrialization (Laslett 1972; Levine 1977, 1983; Tilly 1978, 1984). New economic institutions, particularly cottage industry, generated a nuclear family structure and increased fertility. Freedom from "patriarchal" constraints permitted more family control of income, consumption, and decision making.

World system theorists have expressed a related interest in the specific ways in which international market forces interact with smaller units, in particular, the household (Smith et al. 1984). Since the creation of an international capitalist economy, members of many families and households in the "periphery," or Third World, have produced for at least two of three economic sectors: (1) traditional economies, (2) local capital, and (3) international interests. Conflicts and alliances among elite economic forces are, to a degree, a function of how individual families are managing. At times the conglomeration of interests and mix with local skills creates enormous opportunities for households (see, for example, Salaff 1981); at other times it causes degeneration of family income and social cohesiveness (Bolles 1983).

Finally, scholars have recently expressed great interest in women in contemporary Third World development (Charlton 1984; Rogers 1979).
Policymakers have discovered that women often provide the food supply and handle much of the household income. The subsistence and domestic sectors can both advance and discourage technological innovation and political change. The social power of the household has thus been recognized for its potential contribution to larger political agendas.

Three theoretical perspectives, then, orient the following discussion of slaves' household economies: (1) the household as a unit of income and economic management and planning, (2) its complementary and antagonistic roles in relation to the plantation system, and (3) the political consequences of slaves' economic autonomy. Scarcity of data limits our conclusions, but regional trends and patterns emerge clearly and set important parameters for future research.

The historical evolution of Caribbean sugar planting is as significant to this analysis as it was to population change. Changes in plantation size, sugar output, and processing potential resulted in the transition from individual and household provision of goods and services to food rationing, distribution of goods by slaveholders, and collectivization of household tasks. The trends were most notable where sugar production peaked as late as the nineteenth century and less visible before. Important intervening variables are terrain and climate: Some ecosystems were more conducive to individualized growing of food than others.

Women slaves worked in the fields and in slaveholders' and others' households, tended kitchen gardens and provision grounds and marketed subsistence crops, and cared for their own houses and children. As with other dimensions of slaves' experience, women's work varied from one period of commodity production to another. In general, women's field labor was more highly valued as sugar production spread and labor productivity peaked in each Caribbean sugar society. In turn, other areas of production and work appear to have diminished in significance. As boom times ended, women did not necessarily return to household concerns, for females had come to dominate in slave populations and were still needed for field labor.

**Houses and the Household**

In the early days of Caribbean sugar planting, when semipatriarchal relations were maintained between masters and slaves, male and female slaves' social relations were much like those in peasant and other agricultural societies. Slaves lived in cottages of various shapes and sizes. Most were from 15 to 20 feet long and from 10 to 15 feet wide, with wood posts 7 feet high. The outer walls were made of lumber or branches laced with wattle and daub, or occasionally stone (Labat 1930, vol. 2, p. 56; Edwards 1966, vol. 2, pp. 164–165; DuTertre 1958, vol. 2, pp. 482–483; Mintz 1974, p. 266).¹ Roofs
were made of leaves from palm, cane, or coconut trees. There were usually two rooms, although sometimes more, with the kitchen in a hallway or outside (Barclay 1828, p. 303; Beckford 1790, p. 228; Handler 1972, p. 68). The earthen floors were often damp, leading to disease (Schnakenbourg 1980, p. 56). In early nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, houses were of wood and raised above the ground (Flinter 1834, p. 247).

Cottage roofs were either flat or arched, although in the French West Indies some were conical, as in West Africa (Debien 1974, p. 221). Simple furnishings included board beds, mats, and occasionally hammocks; a small table and two or three stools; and earthen, iron, and calabash containers and cooking utensils (Edwards 1966, vol. 2, pp. 164–165; Flinter 1834, p. 247; Handler 1972, p. 68; N. Hall 1977, p. 181; Carmichael 1834, vol. 1, p. 129; Labat 1930, vol. 2, p. 56). Skilled slaves often had more elaborate, larger houses that they constructed themselves, at their own expense (Carmichael 1834, vol. 1, p. 124).

Huts were 10 to 12 yards apart in a yard shared by family members and friends. They were arranged in a circle or line, not far from the master’s house (DuTertre 1958, vol. 2, p. 483; Labat 1930, vol. 2, p. 57). In the seventeenth century French West Indian slaves were given individual houses, with men’s huts larger to allow for future families (Debien 1974, p. 220). More variation prevailed in Guadeloupe. Some families lived together in a house; or parents lived in one house, children in a second, and males of 16 years and older constructing their own huts and cottages for neolocal households. Males generally constructed houses and “work grounds” in the British West Indies as well (Moreton 1793, p. 150). Single slaves often had their own cottages in the French West Indies and in Trinidad (Debien 1974, p. 220; Carmichael 1834, vol. 1, p. 124). Slaves generally built their own houses with materials or “debris” found on the estate (Bennett 1958, p. 32). French planters wanted the huts of single women to be close to those of other slaves (Debien 1974, p. 220). These circumstances left women dependent on kin and friends for aid in erecting shelters (Bennett 1958, p. 100). But it is likely that, with the extraordinarily high labor expectations for Caribbean women slaves, they occasionally built their own houses.

Women cooked, maintained their cottages, and made and mended clothing. They gathered food from fields and kitchen gardens. Manioc and cassava flours were usually distributed by slaveholders, but grinding stones among slaves’ archaeological remains suggest that slave women sometimes milled grain (Handler 1972, p. 68). “Earthen pots, gourds and calabash dishes” were presumably made by the slaves, probably by women (Handler 1972, p. 68). Stews, soups, and roasted and boiled legumes and vegetables were eaten. British West Indian slave women boiled “pots” at noon and in the evening (Moreton 1793, p. 150). Women and children drew water from nearby ponds.
Clothing manufacture and care involved diverse tasks, although many slaves, particularly children, wore no clothing. Some slaves received material to make clothing, others the clothing itself (Tomich 1976, p. 206; Phillips 1949, p. 10; Levy 1980, p. 9; Pinckard 1970, vol. 1, p. 289). Women made and mended clothing and presumably gathered leaves and straw to shape sleeping mats. The large number of sick slaves on any plantation (perhaps 40 percent of the work force during the harvest) suggests that many more required home care, probably provided by women, as it was in the plantations’ infirmaries.

To stress women’s responsibilities in household and family work is not to imply that men carried no domestic burdens, especially single men. But the historical record yields few examples of male engagement in household chores. Assuming an entirely equitable division of labor within the slave family—a condition lacking empirical support—the many women heads of household tells us that on the whole, women were more often keepers of the family.

Women’s days were nearly endless, especially during the harvest, when sugar cultivation and processing often meant 18 hours of plantation work. Observers wondered at Cuban slave women’s good humor, as they completed household tasks while male kin rested (Ortiz 1975, pp. 198-199). Seventeenth-century writer Père Labat (1930, vol. 2, p. 53) noted that females first served the male his meal, then ate with the children. Yet these homemaking activities brought status. Mintz (1974, pp. 239-248) underscores women’s authority in her “domain,” the domestic realm. Mathurin (1975, p. 2) concurs, for “each woman was the recognized ruler of her hut and her household.”

A change in slaves’ housing in a succession of booming sugar islands symbolized changes in the domestic lives of slaves and women’s work. Slaves in new sugar areas resided in barracklike structures. The slaves themselves built these dwellings but by the direction of and with materials provided by slaveholders.

In Cuba more than half of the estate owners built barracones for their slaves (Moreno Fraginals 1977). Each family or single slave was consigned to one of the barrack’s many rooms, which opened onto a courtyard. Separate entrances were maintained for men, married women, and single women (Bremer 1853, vol. 2, pp. 312, 355; Moreno Fraginals 1977; Scott 1985, p. 16). A woman cooked cauldrons of rice for the entire large household. In Puerto Rico group houses, or cuartelles, were built in parallel lines with a street or lane in between (Díaz Soler 1974, p. 163). Lewisohn’s (1970, p. 118) description of houses in eighteenth-century St. Croix reveals a similar pattern: “long motel-like row houses built with one wall between each unit. A family had two adjoining rooms with a connecting door.”

Tomich (1976, pp. 222-225) describes the same transition to dormitory-style housing in some areas of the French West Indies in the 1700s.
slave households were less often found in the French islands by mid-century. Fewer slaves lived alone. Even in the British West Indies, where barracks housing was less common, domestic functions were more often centralized. Pinckard (1970, vol. 1, p. 288) describes an estate in Barbados in the early 1800s where the cabins of 15 families formed an octagon around a shared kitchen.

Women were relieved of some domestic responsibilities with this collectivization of residence, but household tasks for the group were assigned to individual females. Flinter (1834, p. 248) observed that a Puerto Rican slave woman cooked for men and women in the field. Clothing still had to be made, along with cooking utensils, bedding, etc., by one or several women slaves. A fundamental division of labor remained, as the work of many women was redistributed to a few. In another sense, however, old patterns changed, for home life was collectivized and rationalized so that the majority of women could join men in agricultural work.

Nowhere is this transformation of male and female labor allocation more apparent than in child care. Children had long accompanied their parents to the field and other work areas, to play, rest, or be carried on their toiling mothers’ backs. But their presence was ever less welcome to overseers (Dickson 1789, p. 12), who demanded full attention to cane cultivation from the growing number of female field workers. As sugar production and productivity grew, the care of young children passed to the slaveholder and his administrators. When Cuban slave mothers returned to work after giving birth, their children entered nurseries (criadas de criolleras) and were cared for by an old slave woman (Knight 1970, p. 76). Accompanying this trend was a tendency for children to enter the work force earlier and to move to more strenuously worked gangs sooner (Higman 1976a; Moreno Fraginals 1977, 1978).

PROVISION GROUNDS

The slaves’ provision grounds have become a source of increasing scholarly interest, particularly as their potential contribution to gender roles and division of labor are discerned (Mintz 1983). An integral part of this discussion is the economic power that provision grounds provided to slaves and the self-sufficiency they brought to a system of production with seemingly little dynamic for growth. Slaves engaged in three systems of food cultivation: (1) kitchen gardens; (2) collectively cultivated, estate-supervised provision grounds; and (3) individualized provision plots. The three held vastly different potential for economic power, status, and income earning, and they contributed in different ways to the continuation of Caribbean slavery.
**Kitchen Gardens**

Nearly all slaves who lived in cottages or huts planted herbs, plantains, fruits, and other root crops and occasionally kept hogs and poultry (Brathwaite 1971, p. 133). Kitchen gardens were women’s responsibility, as horticulture generally is across cultures. Produce was for use, rarely for sale. But some petty trading took place, particularly where collectively tended provision plots or the importation of food precluded agricultural entrepreneurship and where kitchen gardens were the only slave-controlled food source. Such was the case in Barbados, the Leewards, and, over time, Cuba and Saint Domingue. In these settings kitchen gardens were invariably needed to supplement inadequate rations; yet in themselves they rarely provided sufficient nutrition (Mintz 1974, p. 192).

Although universally tiny, the gardens showed some variation in dimension across Caribbean slave societies and stages of sugar production. Because in the seventeenth-century French West Indies the houses were 10 to 12 yards apart, the kitchen gardens could occupy only several square feet (DuTertre 1958, vol. 2, p. 483). Dwellings were brought closer together in the eighteenth century, 5 to 7 yards between cottages (Labat 1930, vol. 2, p. 57), reducing the amount of space available for gardening and keeping animals. Larger provision grounds then grew in size. In St. Croix about 20 to 30 square feet of land was available per couple for yard gardens (Lewisohn 1970, p. 240). There and elsewhere in the region the collectivization of slaves’ housing reduced the availability of gardens, but their importance grew because food rations were small and only sporadically distributed.

**Individualized Provision Grounds**

Greater quantities of produce were cultivated on larger provision grounds or “polincks.” The slaves themselves cleared, planted, and tended these lands (Brathwaite 1971, p. 133). Provision grounds were apparently small, even by modern Third World standards. Debien (1974, p. 207) and Tomich (1976, p. 213) conclude that most French West Indian provision plots were smaller than two acres. Edwards (1966, vol. 3, p. 255) wrote that British West Indian polincks covered about a quarter of an acre. In the French West Indies peas, manioc, cabbage, sweet potatoes, rice, millet, and maize were raised (Debien 1974, pp. 183–189); in Jamaica the slaves raised pepper, peas, beans, sweet potatoes, cassava, pineapples, pumpkins, cucumbers, okra, and, after 1792, breadfruit (Brathwaite 1971, p. 133). Produce was more diversified than on common lands or in kitchen gardens. “Each slave cultivated as, and what, he wanted to cultivate” (Mintz 1974, p. 194). Some livestock was kept, generally pigs and poultry (Pinckard 1970, vol. 2, p. 105; Leslie 1740, p. 322; Bremer
In the early years of Puerto Rican sugar planting, through the early 1800s, many slaves had horses (Flinter 1834, p. 284).

The amount of time devoted to provision grounds, their value, contribution to plantation agriculture, and role in gender stratification are debated. Nearly all Caribbean slave societies scheduled some time for provision tending by slaves. The French Code Noir granted free Saturdays or half a day on Saturday and supplementary rations (Tomich 1976, p. 205). British West Indian laws permitted cultivation of grounds every other Saturday (Lewis 1834, p. 83), although visitors also report that slaves tended their grounds on Sundays (Moreton 1793, p. 149). Except during the harvest, Jamaican estates generally granted slaves every other Monday for cultivation, as well as Sundays, Christmas, Easter, and the Whitsun holidays (Brathwaite 1971, p. 293; Leslie 1740, p. 322). But often slaves were permitted more time and sometimes spent all of their free hours, including mealtimes, tending their land and marketing crops. In British Dominica, for example, slaves tended polincks one day a week or on Saturday afternoon, from noon to 2:00 P.M. daily, and on Sundays (Atwood 1791, pp. 179, 258–259). Slaves on St. John in the Danish West Indies tended gardens on Saturday afternoons when not harvesting sugar and at noon and on Sundays (Olwig 1985, pp. 18–22). The attitude of slaveholders toward provision growing depended on two factors: the intensity of sugar cultivation and the dependence of slaves, slaveholders, and their retainers on slave-grown provisions.

French West Indian planters imitated the Portuguese in Brazil, with provision grounds the main source of plantation food, although slave codes held that these were for the slave’s economic benefit and were not meant to provide sustenance. As late as the nineteenth century, only about 21 percent of Martinique’s and 10 percent of Guadeloupe’s plantations provided nutrition solely through rations (Schnakenbourg 1980, p. 55). In the Danish West Indies “the Negroes were expected to raise all their own food, except for such low-grade fish or defective Irish beef as might be allotted to them when the food supply ran out” (Westergaard 1917, p. 158; Olwig 1985, p. 54). Even domestic slaves were to feed themselves from provision grounds on many Jamaican estates (M. G. Lewis 1834, p. 82). Under these circumstances slaves often were encouraged to tend their grounds and permitted extra days. M. G. Lewis (1834, p. 23) allowed his slaves cultivation time every Saturday. Martinique’s and Guadeloupe’s masters insisted that slaves attend to their grounds and purchased produce as an incentive to cultivation (Tomich 1976, pp. 207, 208). Slaves in Martinique were allowed as much land as they needed for cultivation (Tomich 1976, p. 155). Indeed, some slaves in Martinique and Guadeloupe hired or procured slaves themselves to tend their grounds (Tomich 1976, p. 220). The same was true in nineteenth-century Trinidad,
where slaves hired one another, paying in provisions (Carmichael 1834, vol. 2, p. 231), and traded and sold provision lands.

The British West Indian slave code of 1800 guaranteed slaves the right to market their crops (Mintz 1974, p. 202; Pinckard 1970, vol. 1, p. 369). Saturdays and Sundays were generally market days in towns, although in some settings, such as eighteenth-century Antigua, formal markets were instituted during the week (Schaw 1939, p. 88). Sunday markets often attracted hundreds to British Leeward towns (Goveia 1965, p. 238). Moreau de Saint Méry (1958, p. 433) wrote that more than 15,000 slaves gathered weekly at the Clugny market in Cap Français, Saint Domingue. Slaves traded goods informally whenever and wherever possible. In Danish St. John no formal weekly markets were found, and much exchange was through barter (Olwig 1985, p. 51).

Whites purchased slave-grown provisions, and in Jamaica, Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia, and other islands with extensive slave-controlled small-scale provision tending, Europeans were almost wholly dependent on slaves for fruits and vegetables. Provision harvests were often sizable, although not all produce was sold. Beckford (1790, p. 256) estimated that a well-planted quarter of an acre in Jamaica fed a “moderate family” with some surplus. A nineteenth-century traveler to Jamaica claimed that a provision ground could maintain a family of four or five for a year and permit a surplus (Stewart 1823, p. 69). Farley (n.d., p. 62) cites the example of a slave in Demerara who sold rice grown on his plot, earning 50 guilders in three months. Hilliard d’Auberteuil (1776, vol. 1, p. 58) writes that a single slave in Saint Domingue working a space of 100 square feet for 2 hours daily could feed more than 20 slaves.

How much did the marketing of crops yield to slaves? Long (1774, vol. 1, p. 537) reported that £50,000 circulated in Jamaica, 20 percent of which was in slaves’ hands, mostly in small coins. Official French sources claimed that a slave could make from 700 francs to 800 francs yearly from provision grounds and trade (Tomich 1976, p. 218). Schoelcher (1948, p. 35) observed that a nineteenth-century French West Indian slave could amass from $300 to $500 from subsistence cultivation and the raising of livestock.

Lacking other cash estimates, inferences must be made from information about how money was used. Slaves in the Spanish West Indies, with the highest rate of manumission in the New World, traditionally purchased their freedom. For many slaves marketing was the principal means to accumulate cash. Even as sugar production became more demanding and marketing opportunities fewer, Cuban slaves garnered money in a group and drew lots to buy their freedom (Bremer 1853, vol. 2, p. 340). French West Indian slaves who hired others obviously accumulated cash, although goods and services
were also traded among slaves. A hierarchy of slaves existed on all plantations, with skilled slaves and those successful in production and trade at the top. They commonly had the finest houses, clothes, and trinkets. There are accounts throughout West Indian slave history of dances and fiestas where substantial outlays of cash and provisions were provided by elite slaves (Ligon 1657; Bremer 1853; Peytraud 1973; Fouchard 1981). “Whites were shocked at how gaily and finely dressed Black women were on Sundays and other Holy Days” (Packwood 1975, p. 92).

This portrait of slaves as yeoman farmers must be tempered with knowledge that individualized provision grounds were often under assault and were collectivized when slaves’ labor was needed in sugar production. In the Danish Virgin Islands, for example, fears of slaves’ independence and the need for their labor in the cultivation of sugar brought restrictions on the time available for tending grounds and on marketing. Crown rule resulted in the slave code of 1755 and insistence that masters approve all sales by slaves (N. Hall 1977, pp. 178-180; Olwig 1985, p. 23). In response, bondmen and women stole their masters’ goods to sell at market; this and other factors led to frequent nonenforcement of mid-century codes (N. Hall 1977, p. 180). Similarly in Saint Domingue, when the seventeenth-century Code Noir forbade internal marketing, slaves traded stolen goods, creating an extensive market that persisted even when rights to formal exchange were restored (G. Hall 1972, p. 181). Slave owners in Bermuda so feared independent activity by their nonagricultural slave population that they retained laws passed in 1623 denying blacks land for cultivation (Packwood 1975, p. 119).

French-controlled Saint Domingue emerged as a major sugar producer, resulting in collectivized growing of provisions under the supervision of the masters (Debien 1974, pp. 178-182). Martinique and Guadeloupe also experienced constriction of slaves’ prerogatives in food cultivation. The original system on those islands had permitted slaves to hire themselves out for a free Saturday rather than tend their grounds. Masters would provide rations to slaves who chose to earn cash by hiring out instead of growing and marketing provisions (Debien 1974, pp. 178-182). Slaveholders resisted distribution of rations; therefore a slave who hired out his or her services had to purchase food from other slaves. In the British Virgin Islands as well, increased cultivation of sugar led to a decrease in cultivation time for slaves’ provision grounds (Dookhan 1975, p. 47).

In Montserrat restrictions on marketing accompanied those on hiring out (Fergus 1975, p. 20), along with rules promulgated in 1736 against planting cash crops: indigo, cotton, ginger, and cocoa (Fergus 1975, p. 19). The laws of the 1600s and 1700s in Barbados restricted marketing as well (Handler 1974, p. 125). Indeed the Christian churches had tried throughout West Indian slave history to prevent Sunday markets. Clergy interests prevailed in ending
formal trade among slaves on Sunday as early as 1736 in Montserrat and in 1824 in the rest of the British West Indies (Mathieson 1926, pp. 126-140).

Cuba represents a complete cycle of planter attitudes toward provision growing from approval and dependence on the product to a policy of eradication. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries provision grounds (conucos) were common to nearly all Cuban plantations and were a major source of income used by the slaves to purchase their freedom (G. Hall 1971, p. 68; Klein 1967, p. 154). Provision grounds virtually disappeared in some areas of heavy sugar production during the late eighteenth century, when slaveholders began to import food (Knight 1970, p. 68; Scott 1985, p. 16).

Provision cultivation was generally supplemented by meat and fish rations, but poorly. Slaves lacked time and land for cultivation and badly needed additional protein sources (Dirks 1987). Masters were frequently urged by colonial and metropolitan officials to improve the quality and quantity of rations. Increased demands by Trinidad's colonial officials to feed slaves adequately failed to bring compliance in the early 1800s. "Slaves on large plantations received relatively generous allowances of salt fish but little else, and those on small holdings were totally dependent on their provision grounds" (Higman 1984, p. 211). In Martinique the local state insisted that planters feed slaves and cancelled Saturday workdays and markets. But slave owners successfully evaded these policies, and both provision production by slaves and inadequate distribution of rations continued (Tomich 1976, p. 205). A visitor to the Danish Virgin Islands in 1793 found that slaves provided nearly all their own food "with uncertain supplemental rations of flour, salted meats or fish provided by the plantation" (N. Hall 1977, p. 178). Slaveholders allowed bondmen and women to starve following a bad drought from 1725 to 1726. These slaves' situation was often, then, like that of slaves who received estate-grown or imported provisions.

**Estate-Grown and Imported Provisions**

Flat and arid settings such as Barbados and the Leeward Islands lacked mountain lands where provisions could be grown but sugar could not be cultivated. In contrast, Cuba and Saint Domingue used slaves in sugar production to the exclusion of food crops. Legally the amount of land given to the cultivation of provisions, whether collectively or by individual slaves, was set. But the laws were ignored where importation seemed to enhance sugar productivity and profits.

In Barbados and the Leeward Islands rations were grown by slaves on estate lands under the supervision of an overseer. Nine-tenths of Barbados's estates fed slaves primarily through estate-grown provisions, "corn and roots" (Colthurst 1977, p. 140). Richard Ligon (1657, p. 22) observed that 70 of 500
estate acres might be available for provisions of corn, potatoes, plantains, cassava, bonavist, and table fruits. In the eighteenth century some estates grew only provisions for sale to their neighbors (Dickson 1789, p. 19). Elsewhere provisions were grown for slaves whose work regimen took them away from individual subsistence cultivation (Olwig 1985, pp. 18, 22).

Rations were unspecified in the early days of sugar production on Barbados, and some food was imported (Levy 1980, p. 9; Handler 1974, p. 10). Sheridan (1985, p. 155) summarized the philosophy of local planters, and its consequences for slaves:

To the extent that British Caribbean planters were economically rational, they were encouraged by the structure of the Atlantic economy and the mercantile system to concentrate their resources on sugar production, and to depend on imported African slaves, foodstuffs, milling equipment, building materials, and other items of fixed and variable capital. What was considered economically rational, however, could well be nutritionally irrational.

Not enough food was grown, for example, at Codrington on estate lands in the late 1700s (Bennett 1958, pp. 37-38). Droughts and the cessation of imports from the United States during the American Revolution caused many slaves to starve (Watson 1975, p. 46; Carrington 1987). This experience led to more provision growing in Barbados (Bennett 1958, p. 101). A surplus was available to British troops in St. Lucia (Watson 1975, p. 47). By 1815 up to two-thirds of estate lands were in provisions (Levy 1980, p. 9). Abolitionists Sturje and Harvey (1838, p. 10) observed that “Barbados is the only considerable English colony which raises provisions and stock enough for its own consumption and for export.”

The distribution of food suggests that consumption by whites of imported food contributed to the undernourishment and death from starvation of slaves. Bean’s (1977, p. 586) calculations show that Barbados’s blacks were largely self-sufficient in food production in the late seventeenth century, moving toward greater dependence on imports as the slave population grew and planters allocated proportionately less land to provisions. Whites consumed mostly imported foods, about a quarter of available food products from 1680 to 1816, and nearly all of the protein-rich foods.

Like Barbados, Demerara (part of British Guiana) grew provisions as an estate crop. The Leewards imported a large quantity of food, leading to barely adequate sustenance (Mathieson 1926, p. 72; Fergus 1975, p. 15). In some cases, for example, Montserrat, all available land was in cane, although Montserrat and the Windward Islands eventually dropped sugar cultivation and became exporters of food to Barbados and the Leewards (Mintz 1974, p. 187; Fergus 1975, p. 15). Ever less time was devoted to collective provision
growing in Saint Domingue. Travelers in the 1700s found no rations distributed and slaves starving (Debien 1974, p. 215).

How much land was mandated for collective provision growing? The Slave Act of Jamaica called for one acre for every ten slaves, excluding “negro-grounds” (Edwards 1966, vol. 2, p. 162). In 1669 Montserrat laws required one acre of provisions for two working persons, one acre of yams for six working slaves, and one acre of corn for four slaves. A 1693 law raised the distribution of provision land to one acre per eight slaves (Fergus 1975, p. 5). The Trinidad Ordinance of 1800 required the planting in provisions of one quarree (3.2 acres) for every ten working slaves, plus food rations and access to provision grounds and time for their cultivation (Higman 1984, p. 210).

Slaves’ access to land and food varied, then, throughout the Caribbean, with small subsistence plots commonly found. Slaves could grow a food surplus or be restricted by a master’s or state rules from adequate time to cultivate or market crops. Slave owners distributed rations of locally grown or imported foods in some areas. In this case the risk of malnutrition and starvation was generally greater than where slaves controlled subsistence cultivation.

**Provision Grounds and the Gender Division of Labor**

How were provision grounds distributed to the slave population? Who was responsible for the work? Who received the product and profits? The evidence suggests strongly that planters and colonial legislatures allotted land to individuals, regardless of gender. In Jamaica, for example, small plots were distributed to males and females (Mathurin 1975, p. 8). Earlier commentators seem to support this contention, assuming that the term “slaves” is generic and does not pertain to men alone. Stewart (1823, p. 64) claims that estate owners were to provide 10 acres of provision grounds for every 100 slaves. The Ordinance of 1785 for the French West Indies clearly states that a small plot should be granted to each slave (Fouchard 1981, pp. 35–36; see also Schoelcher 1948, p. 35). Travelers’ and slaveholders’ accounts also suggest that women routinely received land. Mrs. Carmichael (1834, vol. 1, p. 174) wrote that in Trinidad “every individual has his own ground, and every mother a fixed portion for each child” (see also Carmichael 1834, vol. 2, pp. 67, 183–185). French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher estimated male and female earnings from the growing and marketing of provisions in the French West Indies at about 400 francs yearly, suggesting that women were sometimes independent entrepreneurs (cited in Tomich 1976, p. 218).

There is also evidence that children received grounds in Jamaica (Patterson 1969) and Martinique (Tomich 1976, p. 206). In Trinidad, if a slave was too young to work his or her ground, another slave was ordered by the master to
do so, with produce given to the child’s family. By age 7, many children were old enough to tend their grounds and sell fruits and vegetables (Carmichael 1834, vol. 2, p. 160).

Patterson (1976, p. 56) is the strongest proponent of the position that women and children commonly had provision grounds and that mothers consolidated the land of their offspring to maximize their social position. This potential power may have induced women to avoid conjugal unions (Patterson 1969, p. 169). Mathurin (1975) also emphasizes Jamaican slave women’s economic status and authority, based in part on access to provision growing. Higman (1984, p. 355) acknowledges economic benefits to women from tending provision grounds, commenting that rewards to a slave woman for the birth of a child were of limited value if time was taken away from the cultivation of subsistence crops.

Mintz (1974) takes the opposite view, questioning whether women held provision grounds. Much evidence supports his position that slaveholders and slaves themselves reinterpreted codes and laws on land allocation in order to grant a large parcel of land to a male head of household or a figure of prominence in the slave community. References to provision grounds most frequently mention men, who share the work and results with wives, children, and friends. DuTertre (1958, vol. 2, p. 485) describes the distribution of land to slaves in the seventeenth-century French West Indies but notes that “their wives” have small gardens (see also Hilliard d’Auberteuil 1776, vol. 1, p. 59). Lewis’s (1834, p. 405) account of sojourns at his Jamaican estates also suggests that males were in charge. He notes, for example, that no slave could possess more than one house and ground for “his family.” Phillippo (1843, p. 219) writes, more ambiguously, that women cooked, waited on men, worked on “their” grounds, and sold “their” provisions, seeming to suggest that males controlled both the grounds and the provisions. A similar observation is made by a traveler to the Danish Virgin Islands, who notes that “many a slave with a family had to spend part of the midday break fetching potatoes from his grounds for roasting” (N. Hall 1977, p. 180). “Households” received land on St. John, according to an eighteenth-century missionary; Olwig (1985, p. 49) suggests that women’s right to use land was recognized in the slave community.

Early observers in the French West Indies described a male slave’s provision ground of one and one-half hectares, tended by three men and a woman, bringing a total of about 20 francs daily (Tomich 1976, p. 218). That polygamous males in Trinidad lived with their wives, whereas a polyandrous female resided with only one mate, suggests that males may have wished to control their labor supply (Carmichael 1834, vol. 1, p. 298). Slaves freely shared food and other goods. But land possession and control were important, with slaves designating heirs whenever possible.
Cultivation of provision grounds generally involved more than a single individual. In Jamaica "the focus for family life was the provision grounds, which the families worked in common" (Turner, 1982, p. 45; see also Mintz 1974, p. 211). Males generally cleared the grounds for cultivation (Debien 1974, p. 208). This heavy, often dangerous work involved felling of trees, hoeing, and removing logs and large pieces of debris from mountainous land (Beckford 1790, p. 256). Males’ strength may have given them an advantage; their capacity to create new grounds was a source of social control. In the French West Indies women did much of the cultivation. This pattern began in the Caribbean in Martinique and Guadeloupe, where, imitating the Brazilian system, women tended grounds on Saturdays, while men hired themselves out (Debien 1974, pp. 178-182). Planters discouraged this resource-maximizing strategy, reluctant to distribute rations, to which hired-out slaves were entitled (Tomich 1976, p. 201). Fouchard (1981, p. 43) claims that in Saint Domingue women maintained the savings of households and families. Danish West Indian slaves repeated the African Gold Coast division of labor, with males tending grounds and females marketing crops (Hall 1980, p. 29).14

Planters generally did not increase the amount of land in provisions to accommodate new slaves. In the French West Indies new recruits worked on gardens of a mentor and were then given part (Debien 1974, p. 80). Edwards (1966) describes a similar system for the British West Indies whereby new slaves became “pensioners” to older ones. This division of goods and labor created a hardship for the slaves, said Edwards (1966, vol. 2, pp. 154-155), but his workers insisted on the practice (see also Labat 1930, vol. 2, p. 47). Slaves also hired or purchased others to work on their grounds. Slave masters sometimes designated a godchild or other slave to work the grounds of an elderly slave (Carmichael 1834, vol. 2, p. 209). At Mrs. Carmichael’s Laurel Hill, a “good” slave was occasionally assigned to a “bad” one to increase production in the latter’s polinck (1834, vol. 2, p. 231). The potential for inequality was great in all of these circumstances. Provision grounds were important sources of food, income, and status; and those slaves who lacked land or effective means to utilize it were vulnerable to malnutrition, labor exploitation, and depletion of other resources in exchange for food.

Domestics sometimes depended on rations or, with only occasional provision grounds, bought from or were given food by other slaves (Debien 1974, p. 210). Children and sick and elderly slaves were generally allotted rations, so only the kindness of fellow slaves warded off hunger (Tomich 1976, p. 212). In Barbados, where individualized provision grounds were rare and rations reluctantly distributed by masters, superannuated slaves were turned out on the streets to beg. Rations to the sick and old went unchanged in Saint Domingue with overall increases in food distribution (Debien 1974, p. 209).
Conclusions

Women had many responsibilities in the slave families they headed and in those maintained by men. Women cooked, helped to build houses and tended them, cared for children, managed horticulture, and carried out much of the cultivation of provisions and perhaps most of the fruit and vegetable marketing. A cruel trade-off finally developed in many areas, as the intensification of sugar production demanded women’s presence in the fields. Women’s status as field laborers robbed both men and women of the economic autonomy associated with the production and trade of food and reduced their domestic commitments and contributions to household economies.

It is a contemporary judgment that fuller incorporation into field labor was less palatable to slaves than the status associated with tending and selling provisions, even with women’s broad and demanding roles in petty agriculture, horticulture, and domestic work. Caribbean slaves left us little about their feelings. There can be little doubt, however, that they were avid entrepreneurs and marketers, roles that have persisted and retained their value in Caribbean societies to the present. And the alternative, the regimen of field labor, is indisputably harsh.

Not all Caribbean plantation societies began with slaves’ committing time to the planting and marketing of provisions. Many islands, for example, Barbados and the Leewards, were not well suited ecologically to individualized planting, as were Jamaica, the Windwards, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. Colonists in Barbados and the Leewards imported large quantities of food and provisions, or planters supervised their cultivation on estate lands. Others, such as planters in Cuba and Saint Domingue, moved away from slave-controlled planting with sugar expansion and the rationalization of production.

Women’s position in the cultivation of provisions has been debated, but a clear, if complex, pattern is evident. Women were counted by slaveholders when provision lands were allocated. But when the distribution of plots to slaves was made, men’s greater status secured them control. Male family heads were granted land. Groups of slaves yielded land and authority to powerful male figures, yet many single women also had provision grounds and may have controlled their children’s plots as well. Women, along with other family members, did a considerable amount of the cultivation of provisions. Men’s capacity to clear and establish growing areas allowed them to create means of production and hence contributed to their social dominance. Marketing was women’s domain, although family members participated in petty provision trading as well.

The picture that emerges from this analysis of slave-controlled production is that males had more power than females in the subsistence sector, derived in part from physical superiority for the accomplishment of some agricultural
tasks. Males' higher status is manifested also in slaves' homes, where females assumed domestic tasks and child care.

Jones (1982), White (1985), Gundersen (1986), and others have stressed a "separate but equal" division of labor for U.S. slave women but acknowledge male dominance in the slaves' households. Domestic tasks and horticulture belonged to women; agricultural work, for the slave family or the master, to men. This separation is less pronounced in the West Indies, where women did much agricultural work, although Caribbean slave men apparently did little work in the home. We can conclude that women enjoyed considerably more status in the Caribbean than in North America and frequently held a great deal of authority.

But for women who could not meet performance demands in all areas, the quality of material life was poor and potential exploitation by more powerful groups and individuals great. Increases in the scale of commodity production eventually robbed women of advantage, solidifying their role in field labor and equalizing their status with men in the realm of commodity production but taking from them traditional sources of authority and status, that is, the household, family, and petty trade and production. Physically weak women, along with other categories of apparently feeble workers, lost still more status and quality of life with increased exploitation of the agricultural labor force.