Slave Women in the New World

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CHAPTER TEN
Conclusions

GENDER STRATIFICATION AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

This examination of the experience of slave women in the Caribbean has revealed that the progressive spread and intensification of the production of commodity crops in the Americas hurt bondwomen. Traditional gender-based divisions of labor—whether influenced by African or Western agrarian patterns and gender role differentiation—were subverted to the demands of large-scale cash cropping. Slave women's field labor increased, and gender became a salient issue in the distribution of workers in skilled plantation occupations.

A growing body of historical and comparative literature concludes that, although economic evolution created some new socioeconomic opportunities for women, in many simple societies women experienced greater gender equality and status (Sanday 1981; Leacock 1983; Chafetz 1984; Safilios-Rothschild 1977; Blumberg 1978). Proponents of this view concur further that, even though males and females occasionally had relatively equal socioeconomic status and females sometimes enjoyed more access to particular social resources than males, females rarely enjoyed a broadly superior position to males (Chafetz 1984, p. 1). Finally, students of gender and social change agree that kinship ties have progressively broken down through history and that the separation of private and public spheres of life have become more marked (Nicholson 1986).

The simplest set of hypotheses on gender stratification and economic change is presented by Sanday (1981), who argues that the material base of society influences "sexual scripts," with hunting and agricultural societies generating male dominance. Threats to a society's material base (war, colonialism, natural disasters) likewise bring men into powerful positions. Boserup (1970) and Goody (1976) agree that advanced agriculture gives men a dominant social role. Male authority in production, along with the development of a complex polity, encourages diverging devolution, or inheritance by both sons and daughters. The system is reinforced by homogamy, monogamy, and prohibition of premarital sex, all of which contribute finally to the formation of nuclear families and the subordination of women.

Other theorists link women's subordination less to social types than to social characteristics. Chafetz (1984) contends that eight factors finally determine the degree of what she terms "sex stratification":

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1. Average percentage of female life cycle spent in childbearing and nurturance.
2. Degree of separation of home and work sites.
3. Relative importance of physical strength/mobility in production.
4. Relative societal emphasis on sustenance versus surplus production.
5. Degree of environmental threat/harshness.
6. Level/type of technology.
7. Work organization (extent of female contribution to production activities).
8. Family structural variables (lineage and locality, division of domestic labor).

Of these eight factors, says Chafetz, environmental threat is a major variable in explaining sex stratification, especially in preindustrial societies. In general, however, technology may have the greatest impact on the way in which societies distribute social goods to men and women.

Chafetz concludes with an assessment of sex stratification based on degree of significance of eight independent variables for seven major societal types. She predicts low degrees of sex stratification in hunter-gatherer and simple horticultural societies, high stratification in advanced horticultural, pastoral, agrarian, and early industrial societies, and low stratification again in postindustrial settings. Several variables have nearly linear relationships to sex stratification: degree of gender stratification, male participation in family labor, extent of female involvement in or control of work, and proportion of female life cycle devoted to childbearing and nurturance.

Finally, Blumberg (1978) suggests that female status alone predicts other dimensions of female social position. She argues that four indicators of female economic power, along with selected political and ideological variables, influence women’s lifestyle choices: (1) female economic power (relative control of means of production, relative control of surplus, relative labor productivity, relative labor indispensability), (2) male force, (3) ideology of male supremacy, and (4) economic power related to kinship. She hypothesizes that these factors contribute to women’s degree of lifestyle choice or discretion to initiate marriage, initiate divorce, initiate premarital sex, and maintain household authority. By studying more than 150 societies, Blumberg found that economic power and male force explained almost all the variance in lifestyle choice.

These universalistic hypotheses about gender segregation and female status can be questioned on methodological grounds (Narroll 1968). As with other cross-national data analyses, these are suspect because many data are missing or unreliable. A second objection to these theories is that societies vary greatly internally, and conceptual and empirical efforts to type them ultimately distort reality. There is, however, a theme sufficiently consistent in these attempts to understand women’s position to warrant attention and possible application to West Indian societies.
Comparative theories of economic change and gender stratification can tell us much about slave women's life chances, but some synthesis of findings about the material foundations for women's position is needed. As societies were uprooted by the slave trade, with a scarcity of food and other resources, slave communities lent themselves to male dominance, much like other agrarian societies (Blumberg 1978) and those influenced by external crises and disasters (Sanday 1981). Within slave societies horticulture, with its historically greater economic and political benefits for women, sometimes flourished because slaves were required to produce their own food. This granted females economic power and status by, in Blumberg's terms, allowing them relative control over a means of production and its surplus product. It was reinforced in the Caribbean by frequent male absence from family life and African women's highly visible roles in many areas of agriculture and marketing (Goody 1976; Boserup 1970; Chafetz 1984).

More of women's labor was required in the fields as the ending of the slave trade cut off the supply of bonded workers. Better processing technology created a greater demand for sugar cane, increasing the need for women's labor, their indispensability, and their economic status, as Blumberg's (1978) and Chafetz's (1984) analyses would predict. Moreover, women's time spent in childbearing and rearing necessarily lessened. The ideology of male dominance, an important factor according to Blumberg for predicting lifestyle choice, mitigated this influence in the assignment of higher-status jobs to men. In general, horticulture and simple agriculture offered women more economic and social power than work in plantation agriculture, in keeping with Chafetz's theory.

Women's indispensability and resulting status is demonstrated in female slaves' opportunities for sexual relationships with white males. The scarcity of white women encouraged white male-black female liaisons that brought material benefits, status, and often freedom to female slaves. This situation differentiates slavery from most other agrarian and industrial socioeconomic systems but is not without historical and cross-cultural precedent. Migratory males frequently leave behind females, who become vulnerable to but benefit from liaisons with middle- and upper-status males, often of different skin color (Kuznesof 1979, 1980). Female migrants, increasingly common in the world today, also find advantage in relationships with men who are of different economic and social status from themselves.

Three different systems of production, then, contribute to our understanding of the position of Caribbean slave women: horticulture, agriculture, and industrialism. Horticulture, or gardening, along with marketing generally brought women relative economic power, as materialist students of gender
inequality have found in other settings (Chafetz 1984; Boserup 1970; Goody 1976; Blumberg 1978). Settled agriculture reinforced male hierarchy through both peasantlike farming controlled by slaves and the preference for male slaves in fieldwork and craft and artisanal positions on the plantation, a finding consistent with the materialist study of women in agrarian societies. Finally, industrial patterns of labor organization are found in plantation agriculture, intensified by the mechanization of processing. Females were badly needed for sugar cultivation, yielding them independence from male kin. They were entitled to goods and benefits independent of family organization or status, again as predicted in the literature on gender and economic change. This autonomy is also found among slave women in domestic service who used household positions to gather resources. The continuing access of males to skilled positions gave them an advantage over women slaves, particularly on estates that began sugar production later with highly rationalized patterns of organization and technological development.

Two production systems of Caribbean slave society, then, encouraged social equality of males and females but on quite different terms. To the extent that horticulture occupied West Indian slaves, the economic contributions of males and females were recognized, yielding bases for economic power and social status to both genders. Industrial influences on plantation agriculture enhanced gender equality among fieldworkers, but male labor was valued for high-status occupational tasks, meaning that females’ social autonomy often led to marginalization, with high-status males differentially able to attract mates and construct kinship ties.²

Can we then conclude that slave women were sometimes comparatively advantaged? Yes, a hideous social system spawned some advantages to women relative to men and relative to women in social formations influenced by other systems of production. But, in fact, neither males nor females had opportunities for mobility or resource gain in many settings. On small plantations males were deprived of chances for skilled work, and on many of these estates male access to land and food production was also restricted, with horticulture and marketing opportunities rare. Moreover, the equality of males and females that developed on large-scale plantations in advanced stages of Caribbean sugar production rested on the shared access of most slaves to only the most rudimentary of goods.

**Marxism and Gender Stratification**

Comparative theories of gender stratification and economic development contribute to our understanding of slave women’s position, but they do not provide a full explanation or analysis. They do supplement the general Marxist categories used throughout this book, enriching their too often
slender application to gender stratification. Several points of synthesis can be usefully pursued. First, in proposing that capitalist and noncapitalist modes of production combined in New World slavery, the means and organization of production and distribution must be more fully described for women’s place to be clear. The gender and racial segmentation and fragmentation of labor forces evident in advanced capitalism are also present in other modes and systems of production, including those of New World slavery.

The work of women in the reproduction of the labor force must be recognized not only for its intrinsic value but also for its functional relationship to other dynamics of social transformation. Slave women’s roles in horticulture and simple agriculture were obviously crucial to the continuation of slave-based plantation production of cash crops. But they were also linked in an essential way to women’s willingness and capacity to have children and their ability to rear them (Chafetz 1984). Hence, to the degree that women supported slavery through the production of use-value, they were also more likely to reproduce the labor force.

Then there is the matter of ideology. There are several particular areas in which the slaves’ and the Europeans’ beliefs shaped material interests: the apparently continuing disinclination of some Spanish slave owners to purchase females; the friendships that developed between slaveholders and slaves, resulting in sentimental manumissions; the likelihood that children sometimes had more emotional than economic value for slaves; the different ways in which petty agricultural labor and domestic work were organized in the U.S. South and in the Caribbean.

It is confounding to try to specify a dominant ideological theme for slavery in the Caribbean or in the U.S. South because women’s position has been studied so little. If, for example, we understand New World slavery as a form of capitalism, then we assume superstructural components associated with capitalism—individualism and competition. These values reflect men’s working and investment experiences, not women’s more cooperative, collective forms of organization (Nicholson 1986; Hartsock 1983). Male-centered ideas about ideology are not wrong in this case but in need of qualification. Likewise, if we understand slavery as a precapitalist mode of production, as Genovese (1976) does for the U.S. South, other problems arise. The characterization of slavery as seigneurial seems to assume mutual rights and obligations between superordinate and subordinate men, reproduced in relationships between slave men and women. In the West Indies, however, bondwomen’s increasing social autonomy, extensive participation in field labor, and casual relationships to slave men undermined patriarchy.

The ideologies and cultures of Caribbean slaves were complex and made more difficult to discern by the paucity of primary materials left by the slaves. There seems little doubt that ideological development and change turn on the articulation of beliefs and values generated by or influencing categorically
different social formations and modes of production. In general, patriarchy and its ideological blend of male hierarchy and obligation to subordinate females gave way gradually to the ideology of social equality, even as new forms of gender hierarchy emerged. This process, neither smooth, consistent, nor inexorable, resulted in the peculiar mingling of ideological tendencies we see throughout New World slave culture (Smith 1953; Wolf 1982; Brathwaite 1971; James 1963). Again, however, a Marxian perspective provides a general framework for the analysis of ideology that theory and research on gender stratification and economic change make meaningful.

**Themes in Slave Studies**

In Chapter One I discussed three major areas of slave studies and analyzed them to determine how their theoretical frameworks and research traditions are influenced by the exclusion from study of women and gender. What general theoretical insights or principles have been reinforced by this investigation of women’s contributions to Caribbean commodity and food production, slave family organization, and reproduction of the slave population?

The first area of theoretical debate considered is the comparative treatment of male and female slaves by their masters. By extending empirical scrutiny beyond questions of both physical abuse and punishment to include access to food and housing and labor productivity, we can draw these conclusions: (1) Women often were punished in the same ways as men and were considered more troublesome workers. They benefited from some improved treatment if pregnant or lactating but generally only during the amelioration period. (2) Women had less access to food because they were believed to require less sustenance than working men and indeed generally enjoyed better health and greater longevity. (3) The labor productivity of women nearly equaled that of men and sometimes was apparently the same. In general, then, differences in treatment were not profound. But variation occurred and is best explained not by reference to the ideological proclivities of various colonial powers, as argued by Tannenbaum and others (although Spanish attitudes toward women may have limited their presence on Cuban and Puerto Rican estates, especially early in the seventeenth century) but by the overall labor needs and intensity of sugar production and the physical demands on slaves, with little differentiation between males and females. Arid lands and those with little food production also strained physical well-being, as food imports and rations were small and sometimes scarce.

Finally, two exogenous variables influenced male and female slaves’ relative access to social goods and therefore their quality of life. Plantation size determined to a great extent the number of positions available for skilled workers, mostly males. Even on an intensely worked nineteenth-century
plantation in Cuba or Surinam, for example, males had more opportunities than females for social goods if a large skilled work force was retained. By the same token some societies had large resident European populations, where both men and women benefited from positions as servants but with women often able to get more and different kinds of benefits from this sort of arrangement. Finally, some slave masters were sadistic, a personality variable we can neither measure nor predict. Cruel slave owners were not necessarily committed to getting more out of slaves; they often appear to have had an excessive need to control subordinates, a pattern we now recognize among the dominant in many non-wage-based work settings and in the nuclear family (Rodney 1981; Martin 1983).

Is slavery best understood as a capitalist or a precapitalist mode of production? The rising productivity of slaves and general capacity of Caribbean slavery to endure, even with the use of women’s and children’s labor, point to the positive effect of highly rationalized production organization and technology on what is best understood as a capitalist firm. However, the study of women in New World slavery, especially in the West Indies, points significantly to the precapitalist or noncapitalist elements of slave systems, reminding us of their scope and contribution to plantation-based commodity production. Women were not always in control of petty agriculture but sometimes did lead their families in the production and marketing of food products. Their labor always contributed significantly to this realm. Horticulture was women’s domain, often a major supplement to food rationed by slave masters. It kept slaves alive and hence supported the capitalist plantation.

Women’s status in subsistence production is meaningful to the categorization of slavery as capitalist or noncapitalist by enhancing our understanding of Caribbean plantations as a dominantly capitalist but ultimately mixed system of production. This unification of systems or modes of production has been advanced in Marxian studies in terms of articulation of modes of production (Foster-Carter 1978; Wolf 1982; Attewell 1984-). Our inquiry into women’s position reinforces the crucial assumption that capitalism dominates social formations, as we observe that women’s domain in the household, in horticulture, and in agriculture shrank as capitalist rationalization seized hold. However, the concept of articulation, with its suggestion that capitalism will inevitably overcome other systems of production, is a static one. We see throughout the Caribbean that, where capitalist commodity production faltered, the peasantry reasserted itself. Small-scale farmers were dependent on paid plantation work, but their involvement in the subsistence sector was considerably greater than during slavery. This was especially true in Haiti, where the slaves’ revolt destroyed the capitalist plantation sector. A theoretical structure such as the “articulation of modes of production” is vulnerable both to systemic changes in a variety of directions and to the actions of members of the underlying population.
Finally, in what ways has the study of women slaves altered our perceptions of the phenomenological position of slaves? As posited in Chapter One, the findings suggest that slave women were often doubly oppressed, as slaves and as wives and daughters. Two ideal typical constructs, slavery and patriarchy, describe women’s subordination. Whether understood as ownership or in other terms (such as Patterson’s natal alienation, dishonor, and subjection to force), slaves and women in patriarchal societies shared these dimensions of oppression. Patriarchy and slavery are not, of course, identical relationships of subordination, but they are similar in several ways: the isolation and separation of the subordinate population from the social life of the dominant group, the use of violence against the subordinate group, the provision of laws that confer ownership rights on the superordinate, and the difficulties of slaves and women in gaining access to goods except through masters or through husbands and fathers (Omvedt 1986; Blumberg 1978; Patterson 1982; Finley 1968, 1980; Davis 1966).

The debate among scholars (Patterson 1982; Finley 1968, 1980; Davis 1966) over what theoretical construct best describes the degraded status of slaves seems sterile in light of women’s at least occasional double oppression. The phenomenological status of slaves is certainly multidimensional and perhaps too variable to permit constant categorization or definition.

Conclusions: Slavery, Capitalism, and Patriarchy

A unifying theme of this work is that ideological and material “structures,” as currently constituted in slave studies, do not explain much about Caribbean slave women’s position. We can create new analytical structures to include women, postulating perhaps that agrarian patriarchy combined with slavery in its capitalist form to produce complex structures of subordination. But, as I have argued, a more analytically fluid and flexible approach to categorization is required.

Three historical trends make it difficult to construct theoretically appropriate patterns of analysis for Caribbean slave societies. First, variation among social settings, a function of the stage of capitalist development, colonial influences, the demographic makeup of slave populations, ecology, and access of the population to food, is great. Second, these and other factors contributed to movement away from simple slave societies dominated by agriculture and patriarchy, as in the Bahamas, to the highly rationalized, industrial patterns of Cuban plantation agriculture, where slave women were relatively autonomous from males and other kin.

Most important is the third constraint against constructing constant analytical structures—slaves did rebel. Bondwomen participated in slave revolts (Mathurin 1975), and women slaves undoubtedly rebelled against their
fathers, husbands, lovers, older brothers, and other men of influence. Slave rebellions and revolts are increasingly studied, and we know more than ever about slaves' physical retreats into marronage, about poisoning and other individual acts of violence against slave masters, and the like (Genovese 1979; Fouchard 1981; Mathurin 1975; Kopytoff 1976; Marshall 1976; Baralt 1981). Much has been made as well of slave culture as a form of revolt against slavery, with the generally unsatisfying results described in Chapter Five on the slave family. We know less about women's insurgency against patriarchy. Perhaps the formation of liaisons with European males was viewed by fellow slaves as a rebellion against the slave community—or, alternatively, as a wise and lucky move for a slave woman with few other opportunities to improve her life chances and those of her children. On the other hand, some forms of slave revolt, such as poisoning (especially common in the French West Indies), were often slave women's province (Debbasch 1964). Here the proximity to the slaveholder and his family that was needed to commit an act of violence—rather than individual social or economic gain—was perceived as an advantage of domestic service. The point remains that structures are subject to change through human action, and slaves had a continuing effect on slavery, as slave women had on the forces of patriarchy.

We cannot solve here what is a major and historical problem in the social sciences, the relationship between social structure and social action. We find that structural-functional theories, with their overemphasis on a social structure informed by a single value or ethos, have been discredited, only to be replaced by other "structuralisms" (for example, structural anthropology and structural Marxism), again stressing ideological influences on the social system (Giddens 1976, 1981, 1982; Attewell 1984). Materialist theories can also be totalistic and inappropriate for complex and textured interpretations of social phenomena. In response, uncritical theories of social action have developed, with daily life itself held to be rebellion because it indicates a will to survive in hostile circumstances.

The study of powerless groups can only advance efforts toward synthesis. Slave women, along with children and older slaves, were generally more vulnerable to hegemonic institutions than were bondmen. Their study can reveal much about how the institutions of slavery came into being, took form, and ultimately influenced slaves' responses. I have scratched the surface of information available about women slaves. For any particular setting endless stories can be told from demographic findings, legends about women slaves, and surviving plantation records. Let us hope that historians and historical sociologists and anthropologists will proceed in unearthing and interpreting these data, for only when we know more about women and other often ignored but significant groups can we resolve the current contradictions in social theory that frustrate our understanding of social organization and change.