
HOME-GROWN SLAVES

Women, Reproduction, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Jamaica 1788–1807

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Once the British transatlantic slave trade came under abolitionists' scrutiny in 1788, West Indian slaveholders had to consider alternative methods of obtaining well-needed laborers. This article examines changes in enslaved women's working lives as planters sought to increase birth rates to replenish declining laboring populations. By focusing more on variances in work assignment and degrees of punishment rather than their absence, this article establishes that enslaved women in Jamaica experienced a considerable shift in their work responsibilities and their subjection to discipline as slaveholders sought to capitalize on their abilities to reproduce. Enslaved women's reproductive capabilities were pivotal for slavery and the plantation economy's survival once legal supplies from Africa were discontinued.

In 1789, Simon Taylor proposed buying more African women for Golden Grove, one of the six Jamaican sugar plantations he managed.¹ Referencing “the first good Eboe ship that comes in,” he explained that he “will endeavour to get ten women out of her.”² A few years prior, in 1770, Taylor dismissed suggestions to increase the property's female population and his proposal surprised his absentee employer. “In regard to purchasing fifteen females to five Negroes, it can by no means answer at Golden Grove, for you want men infinitely more than women, for there are many things which women cannot do.”³ Slaveholders reluctantly bought females for their Jamaican sugar estates throughout the seventeenth century and maintained this practice until the late eighteenth century.⁴ They preferred buying males, whom they considered more versatile and capable of performing the sugar plantations' variously demanding agroindustrial tasks. Proprietor William Beckford explained, “A Negro man is purchased for a trade or cultivation and different process of the cane.” Women, however, could efficiently perform “only two” roles: within either “the house, with its several departments, and the supposed indulgences, or the field with its exaggerated labours.”⁵

Despite Simon Taylor's assertion that enslaved women were less capable than men, slaveholders willingly exploited females to achieve productivity goals. Enslaved women worked alongside their menfolk, clearing fields for planting, digging cane holes, and cutting and carrying canes from