

# Slave Women and Reproduction in Jamaica, c.1776–1834

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## Abstract

This article explains the failure of the Jamaica slaves to reproduce naturally in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It argues that the explanation for the failure stemmed from dietary inadequacies and the harsh working routines of sugar cultivation, which compounded epidemiological and whatever social, cultural and political factors may have motivated Jamaican slave women concerning their own reproductive capabilities.

The problem of creating a self-reproducing slave population after the ending of the British Atlantic slave trade in 1807 meant that the fecundity of slave women became central to the viability of plantation slavery in the British Caribbean. Such women were noticeably less fertile than their North American sisters. In the second half of the eighteenth century 40 to 50 per cent of the slaves on Jamaican sugar estates were women, but gross reproduction rates did not reflect this relative parity among the sexes.<sup>1</sup> About half the female slave population in the British Caribbean in the mid-eighteenth century and as many as a third at the time of emancipation remained childless compared with only 10 per cent of slave women in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Before 1807 British Caribbean slave-owners regarded buying slaves rather than breeding them as a necessary practice. Planters calculated the costs of purchasing adult and adolescent Africans as opposed to rearing children themselves and concluded that

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<sup>1</sup> David Beck Ryden, 'Producing a Peculiar Commodity: Jamaican Sugar Production, Slave Life, and Planter Profits on the Eve of Abolition, 1750–1807' (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999) [hereafter Ryden, 'Producing a Peculiar Commodity'], p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> J. R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery: The Process of Amelioration, 1750–1834* (Oxford, 1988) [hereafter Ward, *British West Indian Slavery*], p. 179.