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## Slavery, Sharecropping, and Sexual Inequality

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Slavery, Sharecropping, and Sexual Inequality

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# SLAVERY, SHARECROPPING, AND SEXUAL INEQUALITY

SUSAN A. MANN

One of the main purposes of women's studies, as Joan Kelly succinctly put it, is to "restore women to history and to restore our history to women."<sup>1</sup> This study follows Kelly's suggestions for restoring women to history by examining how changes in major forms of production affected the respective roles of men and women in different classes and racial groups.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, this

This essay is based on work completed as a part of the "Southern Women: The Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender" working paper series cosponsored by the centers for research on women at Memphis State University, Duke University—University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, and Spelman College. I thank E. Higginbotham, L. Coleman, S. Coverman, M. Heung, C. Greene, L. Weber Cannon, M. Sartisky, G. Welty, H. Benenson, H. Hayes, and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and critical insights. I am also grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities 1985 summer stipend program for funding this research.

<sup>1</sup> Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Kelly uses the term "mode of production," rather than form of production, in her discussion of social change and sexual inequality. Yet, she incorrectly equates changes in the mode of production with less significant economic changes wrought by events like the American Revolution. To be more precise, this paper analytically distinguishes between the mode of production—which represents the dominant form of production in a given historical era—and other specific forms of production which can coexist alongside the dominant mode within a given social formation.

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article examines how the transition from slavery to sharecropping affected the position of freedwomen in the American South.<sup>3</sup>

Since sexism is a distinct form of oppression that can cut across race and class lines, analyzing sexism within oppressed groups has presented feminists with a number of theoretical and political dilemmas. For example, given the central thesis of Marxist theory that private property is the root of women's oppression, socialist feminists have had great difficulty explaining the distinct nature of patriarchal oppression when it has been manifest in both propertied and propertyless classes.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, discussions of Black women's domination by Black men in writings by women of Color have generated a good deal of intraracial controversy and debate. This controversy received national publicity in response to the enormously popular film version of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which candidly portrayed domestic violence and incest within Black households.<sup>5</sup>

Because oppression within a group marked by sex, race, class, or ethnicity is divisive of group solidarity, it must be acknowledged and understood in order to preserve the health of the community. Indeed, the roots of the modern feminist movement stem, in part, from sexism within the civil rights and "new left" movements, just as the women's movement of the nineteenth century arose, in part, from sexism within the abolitionist movement.<sup>6</sup> Recognition of this oppression is thus an integral part of reconstructing women's history. Yet, such recognition can reinforce racist and classist

<sup>3</sup> The term "Black women" is sometimes used in this article interchangeably with "slave" and "sharecropping women." However, not all Black women were slaves since there were also free people of Color living in the southern states during the antebellum era.

<sup>4</sup> For the classical Marxist discussion of the origins of patriarchy, see Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1974). For a modern socialist feminist analysis, see Heidi I. Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 1-41.

<sup>5</sup> Trudier Harris, "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence," *Black American Literature Forum* 18, no. 4 (1984): 155-61; Mel Watkins, "Sexism, Racism and Black Women Writers," *New York Times Book Review* (June 1986), 1 and 35-37. While the film *The Color Purple* had a number of virtues, it also did much to reinforce racist stereotypes, a problem exacerbated by the juxtaposition of slapstick comedy with the serious issues of racist terror and domestic violence. Thus, I am not praising this film but merely recognizing its role in bringing the controversies over oppression by the oppressed to a much larger audience.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, "The First Feminists," and Jo Freeman, "The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structure, Activities, and Ideas," both in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman, rev. ed. (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield, 1984), 533-42, 543-56.

stereotypes or make the just demands of oppressed groups vulnerable to external racist, classist, and sexist manipulation. Moreover, conflict about giving priority to one social critique over another in strategies for political action can itself divide progressive groups and impede social change. Consequently, analyzing oppression within oppressed groups is like “dancing on a minefield.”<sup>7</sup>

There are no easy solutions to these political dilemmas. Some feminist theorists, like those in the Combahee River Collective, have sought to resolve these dilemmas by formulating theories about the multiple dimensions of Black women’s oppression, arguing against horizontal hostilities that split the solidarity of oppressed groups.<sup>8</sup> Other writers have tried to establish a contextual understanding of multiple oppressions as exemplified by Ann Petry’s “Like a Winding Sheet,” a moving short story that shows how racism and oppressive working conditions fostered wife abuse.<sup>9</sup> This article looks at historically specific relationships between oppressions experienced by Afro-American women during the transition from slavery to sharecropping, in order to reconsider Joan Kelly’s historical work on women. Kelly argues that historical periods traditionally characterized as eras of “progressive” social change, such as the Renaissance or the American Revolution, often have not been progressive for women and instead have entailed greater restrictions on the scope and power of their social roles. Although this thesis calls into question many key assumptions regarding the nature of historical development, it has received a good deal of substantiation from recent scholarship on women.<sup>10</sup>

While the abolition of slavery was clearly a major progressive transformation for both Black men and women, sharecropping was not the most progressive available alternative following the Emancipation. Rather, the sharecropping system was a compromise solution to serious conflicts between landowners and the emanci-

<sup>7</sup> This quote is a paraphrase of the title of Annette Kolodny’s article, “Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism,” in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 144–67. For a discussion of some of these political dilemmas, see Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 362–72.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Petry, “Like a Winding Sheet,” in *Women and Fiction: Short Stories By and About Women*, ed. Susan Cahill (New York: New American Library, 1975), 132–42.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly (n. 1 above), 1–15; Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 83.

pated slaves.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the failure of radical land reform, the demise of any hopes for “forty acres and a mule,” and a continuing concentration of land ownership resulted in a strictly controlled system of production and marketing. Sharecroppers had little control over which commodity was produced and sometimes had little control over their labor, depending on the amount of assets, such as land or machinery, furnished by the landowner. In turn, usurious credit arising from the crop-liens system often locked croppers into a system of virtual debt peonage. These factors, when combined with legal and informal controls over Black labor, such as the notorious Black Codes, created production and exchange relations reminiscent of semifeudal or semifree precapitalist forms of labor.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, in relative terms, sharecropping was an important advance over slavery. The legal and institutional rights to human property were abolished so that human beings could no longer legally be bought, sold, tortured, or murdered under the sacred penumbra of private property. The diet, education, leisure time, and general standard of living of the emancipated improved. For example, the per capita reduction in working hours for the Black population after the Emancipation was between 28 and 37 percent.<sup>13</sup> In addition, freedmen and women were able to make their own consumption decisions—an important freedom often taken for granted by a nonslave population.

Kelly has also argued that whenever private and public domains have become more differentiated, sexual inequalities have increased.<sup>14</sup> According to Kelly, the separation of work into “production for subsistence” and “production for exchange” affects the sexual division of labor and women’s “equal relations to work or

<sup>11</sup> Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862–1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 141–223.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860–1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 70–73; Susan A. Mann, “Sharecropping in the Cotton South: A Case of Uneven Capitalist Development in Agriculture,” *Rural Sociology* 39, no. 3 (1984): 412–29.

<sup>13</sup> R. Ransom and R. Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1–39.

<sup>14</sup> Slaves and sharecroppers may not have made these conceptual distinctions between public and private spheres of life. As Lawrence Levine argues, slaves did not subjectively compartmentalize their lives like people do in the modern era. See Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 157–58. Nevertheless, I have maintained these distinctions because this category scheme is objectively meaningful in terms of power relations arising from the difference between production for use and production for exchange.

property with men of their class."<sup>15</sup> Under both slavery and sharecropping, domestic labor or work inside of the home was labor geared toward production for subsistence, while agricultural labor or work outside of the home was directed primarily toward the production of commodities for exchange.<sup>16</sup>

Sharecropping presents a particularly interesting case for examining Kelly's thesis, since production for exchange under the sharecropping system was often predicated on the labor of the entire family. Relative to other types of production units, family labor enterprises blur the distinction between private and public spheres of social life. However, relative to slavery, Black women's commodity-producing field labor was reduced in sharecropping, even though this labor still made a significant contribution to household income. As in many other family labor enterprises, it also appears that male croppers controlled the labor of family members and, hence, held more power than women held over income and property.<sup>17</sup>

For this comparative analysis of the effect the transition from slavery to sharecropping had on sexual equality, it seems appropriate to use some of the same criteria Kelly suggested for gauging the relative contraction or expansion of the powers of women.<sup>18</sup> Because it is not possible to examine all of the criteria suggested by Kelly in an article-length essay, this study will be limited to an evaluation of how changes in economic roles, domestic power relations, violence against women, reproductive freedom, and access to education affected Afro-American women.<sup>19</sup> Because few

<sup>15</sup> Kelly (n. 1 above), 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> Whether domestic labor constitutes production for use or production for exchange has been the subject of long-standing debates in the feminist literature. Indeed, in a previous article I argued that, under certain historical conditions, domestic labor can entail production for exchange, such as when this domestic labor is directed toward reproducing the commodities of labor power or wage labor. See Emily Blumenfeld and Susan Mann, "Domestic Labour and the Reproduction of Labour Power: Towards an Analysis of Women, the Family, and Class," in *Hidden in the Household: Women's Domestic Labour under Capitalism*, ed. Bonnie Fox (Toronto: Women's Press, 1980), 267–307.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Allen, *The Labor of Women in the Production of Cotton* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1931), 147; Carolyn E. Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly, 20. Kelly also suggests an analysis of changes in women's cultural roles, their political roles, and ideologies about women.

<sup>19</sup> Considering the many ways in which Blacks were excluded from economic and political power during these eras, cultural roles might prove extremely important for reassessing sexual inequality in future research. See, e.g., Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985) for a discussion of some of the cultural roles of slave women.

historical studies of the post-Civil War South include a sustained account of Black women sharecroppers, my own study is necessarily methodologically exploratory.<sup>20</sup> To overcome some of the methodological difficulties of studying slaves and sharecroppers, whose voices are not a part of the existing historical record, I have interwoven available quantitative data with more qualitative types of data, such as oral histories.<sup>21</sup> Through combining these methodologies, this study attempts to piece together the social fabric of these people's lives and to place their lives within the larger context of economic and social history.

### Gender differences in economic roles

An abolitionist sympathizer noted with bitter irony that slaveowners made a "noble admission of female equality" in their attempts to wrench as much labor as possible from *both* female and male slaves.<sup>22</sup> It is estimated that in the Cotton Belt slave women spent approximately thirteen hours a day in fieldwork, engaged in such diverse and traditionally masculine tasks as plowing fields, dropping seeds, hoeing, picking, ginning, sorting, and moting cotton.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as Deborah White points out, those who reported that women and men did the same work seldom reported the ages of the women. White suggests that, although women of childbearing age did plow and do heavy labor, the middle ages or the post-childbearing ages were the most labor-intensive years of a woman's life.<sup>24</sup> In this way slaveowners tried to maximize bondswomen's capacity to labor and to be in labor by matching production demands to family and biological life cycles.

The fact that slaveowners tried to exploit as much profit as possible from both female and male labor did not mean that a

<sup>20</sup> This study relies heavily on a few notable exceptions to the scarcity of research on sharecropping women. These exceptions include the following works: Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic, 1985); Jaynes (n. 11 above); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Although oral histories present problems in terms of the representativeness of such historical evidence, they do provide a more valid means of empathetically understanding the subjects of one's research in keeping with the sociological method of *verstehen*. Moreover, in this particular study, oral histories help to reduce the inherent problems of a social researcher like myself, studying men and women of a different race and class, who also lived in a different historical era.

<sup>22</sup> An abolitionist sympathizer quoted in Jones, 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15; Ransom and Sutch (n. 13 above), 233.

<sup>24</sup> White, 114.



division of labor by sex was absent in the slave community. In fieldwork, most women were ranked as three-fourths hands and pregnant or nursing women as one-half hands, regardless of their individual productivity.<sup>25</sup> While women performed many traditionally masculine tasks, those tasks that demanded sheer muscle power were often exclusive to men, such as clearing land or chopping and hauling wood. In addition, very few women served in high-status positions, such as those of skilled artisans and mechanics or supervisors and drivers of male (or even female) slave crews.<sup>26</sup>

Male slaves also regarded many traditionally male tasks as unsuitable for bondswomen, just as they regarded many domestic tasks as unsuitable or degrading for themselves.<sup>27</sup> Leslie Owens describes how one means of humiliating male slaves was to require them to do certain types of domestic labor, such as making them wash clothes. She writes, "So great was their (the male slaves') shame before their fellows that many ran off and suffered the lash on their backs rather than submit to the discipline."<sup>28</sup> Apparently, even slave husbands in cross-plantation marriages, who saw their wives only on weekends, did not do their own laundry. One observer described how on "Saturday night, the roads were . . . filled with men on their way to the 'wife house,' each pedestrian or horseman bearing his bag of soiled clothes."<sup>29</sup>

It has been argued that because the slave's own household was one of the few realms of social life where labor took place outside of the strict supervision and purview of whites, domestic activities, though arduous, offered Black women a degree of personal autonomy and fulfillment. This is exemplified by the remark of one slave about her mother and grandmother, "Dey done it 'cause dey wanted to. Dey wuz workin' for deyselves den."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, if

<sup>25</sup> Jones, 15 and 17.

<sup>26</sup> Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 141–42; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 23; Jones, 18–19.

<sup>27</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 490; hooks, 21–22; Jones, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Leslie H. Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 195.

<sup>29</sup> An observer quoted in Christie Farnham, "Sapphire? The Issue of Dominance in the Slave Family, 1830–1865," in *To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780–1980*, ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 68–83, esp. 79–80. Farnham notes various authors' discussion of men's work within slave households. She concludes that such male domestic labor tended to be an occasional activity.

<sup>30</sup> Jones (n. 20 above), 29. For a discussion of how the slave's own domestic labor provided one of the few spheres of autonomy and meaningful work in the slave

this domestic labor is included in estimates of total labor time expended, slave women worked longer hours per day than slave men.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, because slaveowners placed a higher priority on agricultural production than on the day-to-day reproduction of their slave labor force, slaves were allowed little time for their own domestic labor.

On many plantations women did not have enough time to prepare breakfast in the morning and were generally too tired to make much of a meal or to give much attention to their children after a long day's labor. Booker T. Washington's experience was typical: "My mother . . . had little time to give to the training of her children during the day. She snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done. . . ." Fed irregularly or improperly, young black children suffered from a variety of ills.<sup>32</sup>

To increase the efficiency of slave labor time, cooking and child rearing were sometimes carried out communally, particularly on larger plantations.<sup>33</sup> While slaveowners probably cherished their own private life-styles, they preferred these more efficient and less costly communal arrangements for their slaves. In contrast, slaves were quite insistent about their preference for eating in their own separate households. Consequently, even though communal tasks added to the solidarity of the slave community, slave women often felt deprived of their ability to cook for their kinfolk or to discipline their children.<sup>34</sup>

Some feminists may view the existence of collective child care and communal kitchens as fostering improvements in the social position of women, since privatized domestic labor reduces women's ability to participate in the larger community, increases their isolation, and makes them more vulnerable to patriarchal dependency and abuse.<sup>35</sup> However, the communal facilities established by slaveowners were created both to reduce slave subsistence costs

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community, see Angela Y. Davis, "The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3 (December 1971): 3-14.

<sup>31</sup> Genovese, 494-95; White (n. 19 above), 122.

<sup>32</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 94.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 94; Jones, 29; White, 113.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, 29; Genovese, 544.

<sup>35</sup> There are numerous discussions of this in Fox, ed. (n. 16 above).

and to increase slave labor time—not to benefit slave women. Consequently, the demise of these communal facilities with the rise of sharecropping would suggest a mixture of both gains and losses for freedwomen.

After the Civil War there were numerous abortive attempts to replace slavery with a system of production based on wage and/or share labor organized into gangs or squads. Gerald Jaynes provides an excellent account of the various social and economic factors that resulted in the demise of gang labor and the rise of family sharecropping as a “compromise solution” to ongoing conflicts between white landowners and newly freed Blacks.<sup>36</sup> Along with his discussion of ex-slaves’ struggle for more autonomy and their rejection of the centrally controlled wage/gang system, Jaynes also explains how gender-related issues helped to foster the rise of family sharecropping.

One of these gender-related issues involved landowners’ acute concerns about the labor shortage that resulted once many women and children left fieldwork after the Civil War. By the 1870s, the number of freedmen, women, and children working in the fields dropped to as low as one-quarter of the antebellum level. Freedwomen often refused to work in the fields because they were paid even lower wages than men and because gang or squad labor put them in close proximity to white landowners and overseers who continued to abuse them.<sup>37</sup>

Blacks preferred the more decentralized system of family sharecropping because it removed them from direct control and supervision by whites. Landowners tolerated sharecropping because it provided a means of dealing with the female and child labor shortage. As one landowner commented, “Where the Negro works for wages, he tries to keep his wife at home. If he rents land, or plants on shares, the wife and children help him in the field.”<sup>38</sup> In short, landowners recognized the usefulness of the male sharecropper’s patriarchal authority in putting women and children to work in the fields.

Indeed, as Jaynes points out, kinship relations and “an authoritarian paternal figure” proved more powerful for ensuring labor discipline than the impersonal relations between overseers and wage laborers.<sup>39</sup> While no doubt emotional commitments to family well-being may have enhanced labor productivity, the use of force

<sup>36</sup> Jaynes (n. 11 above).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 230–32; Ransom and Sutch (n. 13 above), 232–36; Wiener (n. 12 above), 46; Jones, 60.

<sup>38</sup> A landowner quoted in Jaynes, 187.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 185–87.

should not be ignored. Unlike landowners and overseers who were now forbidden to use the lash, husbands and fathers could legally use corporal punishment to discipline their wives and children. As an observer noted, "One man, this year, felt obliged to give his own son a tremendous beating, for not performing his share of the labor."<sup>40</sup> Such obligations for disciplining family members were even contractually specified. For example, cropper Thomas Ferguson agreed in his share contract to "control (his) family and make them work and make them behave themselves."<sup>41</sup>

The rise of family sharecropping, then, increased Black women's involvement in field labor in the decades following the Civil War. In this way, sharecropping women were direct victims of this oppressive way of organizing agricultural labor. Sharecropping clearly combined classism, racism, and patriarchy—giving white, well-to-do males control as landowners and giving Black males control as family patriarchs. However, when compared to slavery, the sharecropping system still enabled freedwomen to divide their time between fieldwork and housework in a way that more often reflected their families' needs than the needs of landowners.<sup>42</sup>

If domestic labor is taken into account, sharecropping women probably worked longer hours than men every day. Elizabeth Rauh Bethel's analysis of both domestic and field labor under sharecropping suggests that women's total working hours were longer than those of men, particularly in poorer sharecropping households where women were likely to engage in more field labor than did other sharecropping women.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, while Black women gained some release from field labor and from control and supervision by white males, their gains relative to Black males, in terms of total labor time expended, appear to be directly related to the wealth of sharecropping households.

The decline in female field labor meant that in the Black sharecropping household the sexual division of labor was more marked than in the slave household. Moreover, as compared to slaveowners, sharecropping families placed greater priority on women's role in household labor, which further reinforced a traditional sexual division of labor.<sup>44</sup> Consider, for example, the view of sharecropper Ned Cobb (alias Nate Shaw): "I was a poor colored

<sup>40</sup> An observer quoted in Jaynes, 185.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Ferguson's contract quoted in Jaynes, 185.

<sup>42</sup> Jones (n. 20 above), 46.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *Promiseland: A Century of Life in a Negro Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 45-50.

<sup>44</sup> Kirby (n. 20 above), 157 and 159; Jones, 63; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 120-21.

man but I didn't want my wife in the field like a dog. . . . I considered I was the mainline man to look at conditions and try to keep up everything in the way of crops and stock and outside labor."<sup>45</sup>

Despite the fact that freedwomen's fieldwork was generally more seasonal than that of freedmen, Black women in the post-Civil War era worked outside of the home more often than did white women. In 1870 in the Cotton Belt, 98.4 percent of white wives reported to the census that they were "keeping house," while 40 percent of Black wives reported "field laborer" as their occupation.<sup>46</sup> In the poorest sharecropping households, most Black women worked in the fields, with some estimates in later years approximating 90 percent.<sup>47</sup>

However, even though a significant number of Black women worked in the fields, husbands controlled the economic rewards from farm labor. As Ruth Allen observed from her analysis of women in Texan cotton production in the 1920s, "It is practically a universal situation that the money received from the sale of the crop is the man's income."<sup>48</sup> In addition, as in the antebellum era, landowners valued the commodity-producing labor of sharecropping women less than that of men regardless of any individual's productivity. This sexual discrimination is reflected in the fact that landowners allocated land to sharecropping households on the basis of the sex and age of household members, with more land being allocated for men than for women and children.<sup>49</sup> Hence, gender inequalities existed even in labor directed toward production for exchange—inequalities that were buttressed both by the prejudices of landowners and by the power sharecropping husbands gained from controlling the income produced by family labor.

Sharecropping women were more likely than men to switch roles and do traditionally male tasks (particularly in poorer households)—their male counterparts seldom did household tasks.<sup>50</sup> Zora Neale Hurston's fictional account of an exchange between husband and wife captures the complexity of this situation where gender ine-

<sup>45</sup> Sharecropper Ned Cobb quoted in Rosengarten, 120.

<sup>46</sup> Jones, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Dolores Janiewski, "Sisters under Their Skins: Southern Working Women, 1880–1950," in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, ed. Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 13–35, esp. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Allen (n. 17 above), 147; see also Sachs (n. 17 above), 26.

<sup>49</sup> Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860–1933* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1945), 88.

<sup>50</sup> Kirby (n. 20 above), 157; Jones (n. 20 above), 63; Rosengarten, 59.

qualities existed alongside the interdependence of husbands' and wives' work:

[Ned, the husband]: "Is dat air supper ready yit?"

[Amy, the wife]: "Naw hit ain't. How you speck me tuh work in de field right long side uh you and den have supper ready jiz az soon ez Ah git tuh de house? Ah helt uh big-eye hoe in my hand jez ez long ez you did, Ned."<sup>51</sup>

While field labor was generally more arduous than household labor, the conditions under which sharecropping women performed household chores were extremely primitive since they owned few pieces of household equipment and lacked running water, adequate insulation, or sanitary facilities. Surplus earnings were more likely to be invested in farm equipment than in domestic labor-saving devices. This could reflect a shared economic interest in investing in types of property that lead to capital accumulation; however, it could also reflect the fact that males controlled farm income.<sup>52</sup>

While the sexual division of labor was more marked in sharecropping than in slavery, oral histories suggest that Black women preferred both the sharecropping system and the ability to devote more time to the reproduction of their own and their families' labor. As one freedwoman remarked when contrasting her work under slavery with her work under sharecropping, "I've a heap better time now'n I had when I was in bondage."<sup>53</sup>

Bethel argues that there were certain advantages for households in which the adult women spent more time in housekeeping tasks. These advantages included the ability to spend more time preparing food, tending gardens, and caring for young children. These reproductive activities not only provided a more varied and balanced diet but also contributed to the material well-being of the family.<sup>54</sup> Yet, while entire families benefited from the time women devoted to domestic activities, it is still not clear whether or not women benefited relative to men. Indeed, there appears to have been a complex contradiction between women's desire to be relieved from the arduous commodity-producing labor of fieldwork and the fact that, by

<sup>51</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (New York: Lippincott, 1971), 16–17.

<sup>52</sup> Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1981), 164–65; Jones, 86–88. For a description of the living conditions of many southern sharecroppers, see Kirby, 174–77.

<sup>53</sup> A freedwoman quoted anonymously in Jones, 60; see also 78.

<sup>54</sup> Bethel (n. 43 above), 47–48; Jaynes (n. 11 above), 231–32.

moving into a traditional household role, Black women enabled Black men to have more control over family income.

### **Domestic power relations and violence against women**

Under both slavery and sharecropping, landowners recognized the Black male as head of his family.<sup>55</sup> Herbert Gutman discusses how religious rules also imposed a submissive role upon married slave women. He describes an incident in which a Black woman had been dropped from a church for refusing “to obey her husband in a small matter.” She was readmitted to the church but only after she made “a public apology before the whole congregation.”<sup>56</sup> Since slaves were often required to attend the churches of their masters as a means of social control, it is unclear whether these church rules were a product of ruling class hegemony or whether they were in fact part of the slaves’ own values and beliefs (as Gutman suggests).<sup>57</sup>

Lawrence Levine provides some insight into American slaves’ values and beliefs in his discussion of how slave folk tales often denigrated aggressive women and celebrated the father as the family’s chief protector. While he argues that these folk tales must be taken into consideration in any understanding of male-female relations under slavery, he is careful to point out that knowing “one’s lot and identity” was a practical necessity for survival and was not confined to women.<sup>58</sup>

This is not to say that slave and sharecropping women were merely passive victims of domestic authority and violence. To the contrary, there is much evidence that individual Black women stood up to their husbands and defended themselves against personal abuse, just as they resisted and fought against the domination and violence wielded by whites.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, relations be-

<sup>55</sup> Blassingame (n. 32 above), 80 and 92; Fogel and Engerman (n. 26 above), 141–42; Genovese (n. 27 above), 489; Jones, 82.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Herbert G. Gutman, “Marital and Sexual Norms among Slave Women,” in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 298–310, esp. 304.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 304; see also John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3d ed. (New York: Random House, 1967), 200.

<sup>58</sup> Levine (n. 14 above), 96–97.

<sup>59</sup> Numerous cases where Black women resisted the domination and violence perpetrated by both Black and white males can be found in Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon, 1972); see also Gutman, 306–7; and White (n. 19 above), 151–52.

tween Black males and females must be viewed within the context of the fact that under both sharecropping and slavery, the oppressions of Black patriarchy paled beside those of racism and classism. Hence, Black males and females depended on each other and their families to work together in solidarity and resistance. Nevertheless, a number of historians (including feminist and Afro-American historians) suggest that it was normative behavior for Black women slaves and sharecroppers to accept male domestic authority.<sup>60</sup>

Modern studies of family decision making generally find that the spouse who makes the major decisions is also the spouse who contributes the most income to the household.<sup>61</sup> If this was also true for the sharecropping era, the facts that women engaged in agricultural commodity production less than men and that they (however voluntarily) did most of the domestic labor would suggest that men held greater decision-making power in sharecropping households, including decision making about family income and property. Since male croppers also were held legally responsible for crop production and for meeting share agreements, this male decision making was buttressed by the state.<sup>62</sup> However, it appears that at least some household property was recognized as belonging to the wife, given the story told by sharecropper Ned Cobb about keeping his wife from signing any share agreements to prevent creditors from "plundering" all of their property.<sup>63</sup> It is possible that ownership of household property was legally recognized if it constituted property the woman brought into the marriage. Nevertheless, personal property, like the household goods Cobb was referring to, must be distinguished from income-producing property, such as land or income from crop production, in terms of relative significance for family power relations.

Though there was a shift from matrilineal descent under slavery to patrilineal descent under sharecropping, this did not prove as significant for Black women as one might expect. Indeed, slave-owners introduced matrilineal descent neither to legitimate African traditions nor to benefit slave women. Rather, they used matrilineality as a formal mechanism for determining property rights over the progeny of cross-plantation unions.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, patrilineality and the legalization of marriage for Blacks after the Emancipa-

<sup>60</sup> Genovese, 500–501; hooks (n. 26 above), 44 and 47; Jones (n. 20 above), 104; Rosengarten (n. 44 above), 14; Woloch (n. 10 above), 226.

<sup>61</sup> Letty Cottin Pogrebin, *Family Politics: Love and Power on an Intimate Frontier* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 96.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, 82.

<sup>63</sup> Rosengarten, 32.

<sup>64</sup> Genovese (n. 27 above), 473.



tion allowed Black men to gain control over their wives' property and earnings, to assume custody of children, and to discipline their wives forcefully. Moreover, rights to divorce were limited even in cases of abandonment or domestic violence.<sup>65</sup>

The issue of violence against women raises other serious questions regarding the dominant roles of both white and Black men under American slavery and sharecropping. Clearly, violence was an ever-present threat to slave families.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, slaveowners made no distinctions in meting out physical punishment: neither pregnancy, motherhood, nor physical infirmity precluded this violence. For example, a particularly odious method of whipping pregnant women involved digging a depression in the ground to protect the foetus while ensuring the ability to discipline the mother violently.<sup>67</sup>

Even though the sharecropping system provided greater protection for Blacks than had slavery, violence against Black women by whites was also rampant in the racially motivated terror that accompanied the Reconstruction Era. For example, inadequate legal protection of Black rape victims is reflected in the fact that "from emancipation through more than two-thirds of the twentieth century, no Southern white male was convicted of raping or attempting to rape a Black woman" despite knowledge that this crime was widespread.<sup>68</sup> Given the complacency of the white legal system toward this violence and toward the flagrant lynching of Blacks—female and male—it is not surprising that the Black community placed a much greater emphasis on racism than sexism.

In the face of such violence perpetrated by whites, Black women tended to stay within the confines of their kin, neighbors, and fellow church members. As the daughter of a Black landowner commented, "Women didn't go into town much."<sup>69</sup> Yet some of these women, particularly those in poorer sharecropping households, did private household work to supplement their families' incomes, while others (often widows and single women) migrated to urban areas to do domestic work. Consequently, the risk of sexual

<sup>65</sup> Woloch, 191. As Kirby (n. 20 above), 173, points out, divorce was also a luxury few southern sharecroppers could afford. Moreover, he argues that, because these people viewed marriage as sacred, traditional morality and poverty "conspired" to bind these people together.

<sup>66</sup> Blassingame (n. 32 above), 83; Genovese, 460–61. For a contrasting view on sexual abuse, see Fogel and Engerman (n. 26 above), 130–34.

<sup>67</sup> Davis (n. 30 above), 8; Jones, 20; Lerner, ed. (n. 59 above), 15; hooks (n. 26 above), 23 and 37.

<sup>68</sup> White (n. 19 above), 164. For a more lengthy discussion of violence against Black men and women during the Reconstruction Era, see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 670–728.

<sup>69</sup> A Black landowner's daughter quoted in Janiewski (n. 47 above), 15.

abuse by white males was exacerbated by Black women's need to supplement their families' incomes through domestic service. As a Black servant remarked in 1912: "I believe that nearly all white men take, and expect to take, undue liberties with their colored female servants—not only the fathers, but in many cases the sons also. Those servants who rebel against such familiarity must either leave or expect a mightily hard time, if they stay."<sup>70</sup>

It is not possible to determine whether sexual and physical abuse by Black males was normative or whether it increased or decreased following the Emancipation since there are few data on the frequency of abuse during these two eras. However, historical evidence suggests that wife and child abuse by Black husbands was prevalent under both slavery and sharecropping.<sup>71</sup> As one Black woman commented in 1912, "On the one hand, we are assailed by white men, and, on the other hand, we are assailed by black men, who should be our natural protectors."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Ned Cobb described his parents' relationship: "If I had a twenty-dollar bill this mornin for every time I seed my daddy beat up my mother and beat up my stepmother I wouldn't be settin here this mornin because I'd have up in the hundreds of dollars. Each one of them women—I didn't see no cause for it."<sup>73</sup>

Since social isolation is associated with spouse abuse, it is possible that the greater isolation of sharecropping households, as contrasted to slave quarters and the more centralized plantation system, might have provided less opportunity for community observation or intervention in cases of spouse abuse.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, sharecroppers' voices make clear that domestic misery and violence were frequent components of everyday life in the rural South. Based on thousands of pieces of oral and written testimony documenting the interpersonal lives of southern farm people during the first half of the twentieth century, Kirby concludes: "There are assuredly scenes of satisfaction, security, sometimes bliss. . . . But

<sup>70</sup> A Black servant quoted in Lerner, ed., 156; see also Janiewski, 18; and Jones (n. 20 above), 73, 114, and 127–34. The absence of information on whether these women controlled the income they received from domestic service precludes a complete analysis of the implications of this aspect of sharecropping women's work for Kelly's theses.

<sup>71</sup> Blassingame, 91; Genovese, 483; hooks, 35–36; Jones, 103; Rosengarten (n. 44 above), 10 and 273; White, 151–52.

<sup>72</sup> A Black woman quoted anonymously in Lerner, ed., 157.

<sup>73</sup> Sharecropper Ned Cobb quoted in Rosengarten, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Genovese (n. 27 above), 484. For a discussion of the role of isolation in domestic violence, see David Finkelhor, "Common Features of Family Abuse," in *Marriage and the Family in a Changing Society*, ed. James M. Henslin (New York: Free Press, 1985), 500–507, esp. 504.

the corpus of this large, if haphazard, collection of testimony contains far more instances of unhappiness, *especially among women*. Marriage was a cruel trap, motherhood often a mortal burden; husbands were too often obtuse, unfaithful, drunken, and violent. The collective portrait is less one of bliss than of pathos.<sup>75</sup>

### Reproductive freedom under slavery and sharecropping

Reproductive freedom generally refers to the ability to choose when and if one wants to have a child. Today, there is a tendency to focus primarily on family planning issues as the major concerns constituting reproductive freedom.<sup>76</sup> However, information about Afro-American women slaves' and sharecroppers' use of birth control and abortion is scant.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, assessing the reproductive freedom of Black women in these earlier historical eras will have to focus more broadly on identifying when (or if) these women were in a position to make choices about their sexual activities and their sexual partners, as well as evaluating the general health care they received during pregnancy and childbirth.

Because of their interests in the physical reproduction of human capital, slaveowners intervened in even the most intimate of slave family ties. While there is some evidence of slave breeding, this does not appear to have been the norm, although a rudimentary form of eugenics was practiced through the slaveowners' intervention in the marriage ceremonies and broomstick rituals that slaves continued to conduct. The brutality of this class-based control is all too evident in the tragic stories from slave narratives where arranged marriages were forced on unwilling slaves.<sup>78</sup> Since slave marriages had no legal status and property rights over slave children were determined matrilineally (whereby the economic advantage fell to owners of slave women in cross-plantation marriages), in

<sup>75</sup> Kirby (n. 20 above), 169–70; my emphasis. Another researcher found a “bitterness towards men as a class” among the young Black women sharecroppers she interviewed, while older Black women did not express this same “bitterness” as noted in Janiewski, 19.

<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of issues often covered under the rubric of reproductive freedom, see Nadean Bishop, “Abortion: The Controversial Choice,” in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield, 1979), pp. 64–79.

<sup>77</sup> Gutman (n. 56 above), 307; Kirby, 162–63; White (n. 19 above), 84.

<sup>78</sup> Fogel and Engerman (n. 26 above), 78–86; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 273–77; Blassingame (n. 32 above), 87 and 89–92; Jones, 34–35.

the interests of capital accumulation owners encouraged marriages between slaves on the same plantation.<sup>79</sup>

Another incentive for encouraging slave marriages on the same plantation came from the fact that slaveowners used family affection and solidarity to discipline family members and to reduce the likelihood of escape or rebellion.<sup>80</sup> The fact that more fugitive slaves were male than female may reflect slave women's greater responsibility for child rearing and, hence, a more traditional sexual division of labor.<sup>81</sup>

Most historians agree that relative to other health issues, health care was at its best for pregnant slave women because of slaveowners' direct interests in the physical reproduction of human capital. Prospective mothers' health, along with their work loads and diets, all became more acute investment concerns after Congress outlawed the overseas slave trade in 1807.<sup>82</sup> Despite these concerns, health care for slave women was extremely inadequate. For slaveowners, short-term productive interests generally took priority over long-term reproductive interests. For example, during cotton boom years, there was a significant decline in slave fertility rates and an increase in slave miscarriage rates. Indeed, in general, in the prewar South, the more agriculturally productive regions characteristically had lower than average Black fertility rates.<sup>83</sup>

Compared to slavery, sharecropping arrangements reduced white male control (direct and indirect) over Black women's reproductive activities. Black women were able to choose their mates freely, to spend more time with their children, and to engage in family relations without the constant threat of family separation. These women bore on average five or six children.<sup>84</sup> Such large families did not necessarily reflect ignorance of birth control or irrational family planning. Rather, children were an economic asset—they augmented the household's labor supply and provided security for parents in old age. As one observer noted, "Children thus may be said to cost the cotton farmer less and pay him more."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Blassingame, 86; Genovese, 473.

<sup>80</sup> Blassingame, 80–83 and 89–92; Fogel and Engerman; Gutman, *The Black Family*, 318; Genovese, 452–57.

<sup>81</sup> White, 70; see also Gutman, *The Black Family*, 80 and 265.

<sup>82</sup> Blassingame, 93; Fogel and Engerman, 122–23; White, 68.

<sup>83</sup> White, 69, 111–12, and 124; Jones (n. 20 above), 19 and 35.

<sup>84</sup> Jones, 85.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Kirby (n. 20 above), 164. As Kirby points out, many of the interviews with southern farm families funded by the New Deal's Federal Writers' Project included questions on birth control. For a discussion of these interviews and various attempts by private and public agencies to distribute birth control information and devices in the 1930s, see 162–69.

Nevertheless, since child rearing was predominantly a female task, young children meant additional demands on women's labor, especially when these children were too young to work.

Some sharecropping landowners arranged for doctors to serve their tenants, but this was not the norm. As under slavery, childbirth was normally attended by midwives who were cheap and nearby, while mothers generally took care of other medical needs. The fact that medical treatment patterns did not change significantly is actually an indication of a relative drop between slavery and sharecropping. That is, the absence of professional medical care for sharecropping families may have been more significant than its absence in the slavery era, since the medical exigencies of Civil War battlefields resulted in major advances in the skills of professional medical practice<sup>86</sup>—advances that did not find their way into sharecropping communities.

### Gender inequalities in access to education

According to John Hope Franklin, the Freedmen's Bureau's greatest success came through its efforts on behalf of Black education. By 1867, schools had been set up in even the most remote counties of each of the confederate states.<sup>87</sup> However, schooling for sharecropping children was often merely a brief interlude between infancy and adulthood. Most children never had the opportunity to attend school with any regularity, since they began working in the fields around the age of ten or twelve. Girls were more likely to get a formal education than were boys because of the greater demand for male field labor,<sup>88</sup> but landlords pressured sharecropping families to keep all of their children in the fields.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup> James C. Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 256–57. It is debatable whether, prior to the Civil War, professional medical practice was any more successful in improving health care than was the lay medical practice of midwives. However, as Mohr points out, the Civil War is often viewed as a transition point for advances in professional medicine, despite the fact that professional medical care for women has been criticized up until the present day. For discussions of the role of wives and midwives in medical care for sharecropping and slave households, see Jones, 56 and 80–81; Federal Writers' Project, *These Are Our Lives* (New York: Norton, 1975), 26; Rosengarten (n. 44 above), 118–19; White (n. 19 above), 111–12.

<sup>87</sup> Franklin (n. 57 above), 308.

<sup>88</sup> Jones, 91; Bethel (n. 43 above), 41; Federal Writers' Project, 19–20; Kirby, 156.

<sup>89</sup> Jones, 64, 76–78, 90, and 96–99; Rosengarten, 19. According to these sources, it appears that fathers had the last word in deciding the allocation of their children's labor between farm and school. Apparently, this decision generated conflict between sharecropping mothers and fathers, with mothers emphasizing school work and fathers emphasizing farm work.

Thus while girls had greater access to formal education than did boys, this education was extremely inadequate, not only in terms of the limited amount of time sharecropping children spent in school but also in terms of the overall quality of the education they received.<sup>90</sup> The introduction of home economics and its ideology of female domesticity into southern public schools in the 1880s and 1890s took place first in Black schools in order to prepare Black women to labor not only in their own households but also as household servants for white families.<sup>91</sup> Though working in white homes was a choice of last resort, there is some evidence that the ideal of female domesticity within Black households had some support among Blacks. Black newspapers urged the “development of a womanly nature” as a means of “elevating and refining” the race, and a number of Black leaders during this era advocated traditional, subservient roles for women.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the inadequate quantity and quality of Black education, the advances in access to education for freedwomen clearly exceeded the slave era when formal instruction in schools was illegal for slaves in most slave states. Franklin captured the class nature of the slave-owners’ fear of educating slaves when he pointed out how the laws against teaching individual slaves were often disregarded and viewed as not very serious, “but the instruction of slaves in schools [established specifically] for that purpose was another thing.”<sup>93</sup>

### Variations in patriarchy

With the rise of sharecropping the position of freedwomen improved, even though the sexual division of labor and women’s roles

<sup>90</sup> In eleven southern states, the average expenditure in 1930 for each white child was \$44.31 as compared with \$12.57 for each Black child. For more information on the quality of education, see Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 110–12.

<sup>91</sup> Druzilla Cary Kent, *A Study of the Results of Planning for Home Economics Education in the Southern States* (New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, Bureau of Publications, 1936), 11.

<sup>92</sup> Woloch (n. 10 above), 226. There are conflicting views in the literature regarding the role that male and female Afro-American leaders played in fostering female subservience and domesticity. Here distinctions should be made between leaders who advocated traditional, patriarchal roles for men and subservient roles for women, those who advocated equal political rights for men and women, and those who included, along with demands for equal political rights, demands for equal social rights and roles. For different views on this subject, see hooks (n. 26 above), 89–102 and 161–84, as contrasted to Elmer P. Martin and Joanne Mitchell Martin, “The Black Woman: Perspectives on Her Role in the Family,” in *Ethnicity and Women* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 184–205, esp. 197–99.

<sup>93</sup> Franklin, 202; see also Blassingame (n. 32 above), 91; Genovese (n. 27 above), 502; Jensen (n. 52 above), 71–75.

in production inside the home became more marked.<sup>94</sup> These women gained more control over their working hours and reproductive freedom than they had in the slave era when white male slaveowners had controlled and/or intervened in these aspects of Black women's lives. It also appears that white males had fewer opportunities to abuse Black women physically and sexually, even though this abuse clearly continued. Relative to Black men, women increased their access to formal education. However, it does not appear that Black sharecropping women experienced an improved quality of life in terms of economic power, domestic authority relations, domestic violence, and their total number of working hours inside and outside the home.

The fact that the position of Black women appears from this study to be subordinate to that of Black men on certain dimensions under both slavery and sharecropping questions the conclusions of some major feminist historians who have documented women's roles during these eras. For example, Deborah Gray White concludes from her analysis of the lives of female slaves that slave households involved an "equal partnership" between males and females—an equality which was predicated on and buttressed by the absence of property in these households.<sup>95</sup> Yet her description of the lives of female slaves, which included wife battering, black-on-black rape, and husbands who "set 'round talkin' to other mens" while their wives worked even longer hours doing domestic chores, undermines her argument.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> These findings call into question Kelly's second thesis, since the position of women improved despite the reduction of women's work outside of the home. Other research provides further anomalous cases. For example, in fascist Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, the increase in women working outside of the home was substantial, in large part as a result of wartime demands. Yet this increase in women's production for exchange, which Kelly predicted would improve women's position, was in fact accompanied by an extensive antifeminist movement which campaigned against women smoking and wearing trousers, closed down birth control centers, and exacted heavy punishments for abortion. See Richard Grunberger, *The 12-Year Reich: A Social History of Nazi Germany, 1933–1945* (New York: Ballantine, 1971), 133, 256–58, 261–62, 278–81, and 288–89. These anomalies would suggest that along with economic roles, the political structures within a given mode of production need to be examined since the extent to which forms of political organization are more democratic or more authoritarian than one another can greatly affect the position of women.

<sup>95</sup> White (n. 19 above), 158–59.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 122, 151, and 152. In addition, on pp. 20–22 White notes that her conclusion about equal relations differs from that of many other writers on American slavery whom she claims too often exaggerated male slave masculinity in an effort to negate the derogatory male "Sambo" myth.

White is not alone in offering such contradictory portrayals. Other feminist writers, such as Elmer Martin, Joanne Martin, and Angela Davis, also maintain that slave households were egalitarian units, despite their descriptions of unequal gender roles.<sup>97</sup> For example, Martin and Martin discuss how “slavery equalized the black man and black woman” such that “the black man did not do any work that the black woman did not also do.” However, on the very same page they quote Leslie Owens’s observation that there “were certain duties considered women’s work that men declined to do.”<sup>98</sup> Thus it appears that, although slave women experienced a masculinization of their roles, slave men did not experience a corresponding feminization of their roles, despite all the attention academics have paid to the so-called emasculated Black male and the corresponding myth of Black matriarchy in discussing Black family structures. Indeed, rather than either the equality or matriarchy claimed by some writers, it seems that slave households were in fact characterized by patriarchy.<sup>99</sup> As hooks notes, failure to acknowledge this patriarchal reality fosters blindness to the fact that “the damaging effect of racism on black men neither prevents them from being sexist oppressors nor excuses or justifies their sexist oppression of black women.”<sup>100</sup>

With few exceptions, patriarchy also has not been adequately acknowledged in writings on sharecropping women. For example, another feminist historian, Jacqueline Jones, is explicitly hesitant to characterize Black sharecropping households as patriarchal. While she admits that there was inequality in “domestic authority,” she argues that the use of the term “patriarchy” is inappropriate when Black males had little control over most significant economic resources; when escaping from poverty was often precluded by

<sup>97</sup> See Martin and Martin; and Davis, “The Black Woman’s Role” (n. 30 above). Angela Davis’s discussion of relations within slave households is particularly interesting because she grounds her analysis in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, pointing out on pp. 7–8 how the fact that slave women performed both male and female work roles provided these women with “proof of their ability to transform things” as well as a “practical awareness of the oppressor’s utter dependence on her”—thus serving to “unharness an immense potential in the black woman.” Davis is also careful not to romanticize Black gender relations; she refers to them as a “deformed equality.”

<sup>98</sup> Martin and Martin, 193.

<sup>99</sup> Farnham (n. 29 above); hooks. If an analysis of American slavery also takes into account the influence of African culture and heritage, the patriarchal features of traditional African family lives would increase the likelihood that American slave households were patriarchal. For a discussion of the relationship between American slavery and the subjugation of women in traditional African cultures, see Martin and Martin, 188–89 or hooks, 16–20.

<sup>100</sup> hooks, 88.



racism regardless of the amount of an individual's hard work; and when many whites continually tried to deprive Black males of all meaningful types of authority and power.<sup>101</sup>

Both White and Jones tend to base their arguments primarily on the fact that the propertyless nature of slave and sharecropping households, which was persistently maintained by racist restrictions on the accumulation of wealth and power by Blacks, precluded the existence of any meaningful notion of patriarchal domination. In turn, although both of these writers provide evidence of interpersonal inequalities in power, they seem unwilling to equate this with institutional patriarchal domination.

It is possible that due to racist restrictions on the accumulation of wealth or power by Blacks, slaves and Black sharecroppers may have experienced relatively more sexual equality than middle- or upper-class whites. That is, these restrictions precluded Black husbands and wives from being separated by the more extreme gender-based differentials in economic rights and privileges that well-to-do whites experienced. However, this greater relative equality should neither be exaggerated nor romanticized given the fact that it was premised on the poverty and deprivation of both sexes.

Moreover, both slavery and sharecropping existed within the context of a larger capitalist mode of production predicated on private property. Consequently, these propertyless classes were under the hegemony of a legal system and other institutions that were property oriented. Male control over women and children in slave and sharecropping households was backed not merely by individual force but also by mechanisms of social control enforced by ruling classes, churches, and the state. Unfortunately, some feminist thinkers have ignored this more complex relationship between property and patriarchy, presenting instead a rather mechanistic equation that argues that, if an individual lacks property, this precludes the existence of patriarchy. Yet major critics of private property, like Marx, Engels, and Lenin, recognized the existence of patriarchy within propertyless classes, even though these same critics have been accused of being blind to gender issues.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, Marx, Engels, and Lenin all recognized that patriarchy, like private property, was institutionalized and not simply a characteristic of individuals.

Institutionalization entails not only objective constraints on social behavior but also subjective constraints internalized through socialization. Consequently, it is not surprising that male domestic

<sup>101</sup> Jones (n. 20 above), 104–5.

<sup>102</sup> Hartmann (n. 4 above).

authority and the relegation of females to traditional sex roles was often fostered by Afro-American folk tales or newspapers and accepted by female slaves and sharecroppers. This is not meant to resurrect either a "blame the victim" approach or the view that the history of Black women is merely a history of passive victimization. Rather, the point of recognizing the subjective dimensions of institutionalization is to highlight the more subtle, yet still coercive, nature of sex-role socialization.

Because property-oriented legal and institutional mechanisms of social control also govern interpersonal life, interpersonal inequalities of power that disadvantage women implement institutional patriarchal domination. Domestic violence and authoritarianism are political forms of institutionalized domination, buttressed by gender inequalities in socialization practices, access to material resources, and existing marriage or family law. While such interpersonal and domestic issues were major concerns of both the nineteenth-century women's movement and the temperance movement,<sup>103</sup> modern feminists have even more emphatically rejected any dichotomy between the public and private spheres of social life when recognizing political oppression. If one takes seriously a major tenet of modern feminist thought that "the personal is political,"<sup>104</sup> then in light of this research on Black women it must also be concluded that the political is personal.

Some writers have argued that because male and female roles are complementary in family labor enterprises, couples are more dependent on each other's labor, and hence, more equal.<sup>105</sup> Though male and female roles may have been complementary under sharecropping, this complementarity was not synonymous with equality.<sup>106</sup> The division of labor under sharecropping was such that female labor was directed more toward production for use, while male labor was directed primarily toward production for exchange.

<sup>103</sup> Freeman (n. 6 above), 536–39.

<sup>104</sup> Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg, *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).

<sup>105</sup> Christina Greene has suggested that the findings of this study would support, rather than critique, Kelly's thesis, if public and domestic spheres were viewed as less differentiated under sharecropping because of the integral and complementary nature of work inside and outside of the home. I thank Ms. Greene for bringing this different interpretation to my attention. However, in my view, this interpretation ignores the importance of the sexual division of labor for determining patriarchal control within family labor enterprises. In this regard, see also Susan A. Mann, review of *Farm Women: Work, Farm and Family in the United States*, by Rachel Ann Rosenfeld, in *American Journal of Sociology* 93, no. 1 (July 1987): 243–45.

<sup>106</sup> Janiewski (n. 47 above), 15.

This differentiation is of particular political and economic significance in a market economy precisely because production for use is by definition unpaid labor, regardless of its intrinsic value. As numerous feminist debates over domestic labor have long recognized, this places women in a subordinate position.<sup>107</sup> Such a sexual division of labor was a major organizing principle of the American family sharecropping system.

Even when Black women sharecroppers engaged in a significant amount of production for exchange, control over income generated from agricultural production was in the hands of men—even if this income was produced by the labor of the entire family. Male control over this income, coupled with the domestic decision-making power this entailed, meant that Black women could only have been in an inherently unequal relation to Black men. This situation is not unique to sharecropping but, rather, is characteristic of many family labor enterprises—both rural and urban.<sup>108</sup>

Slave and sharecropping households alike were organized patriarchally, and this sexual inequality was buttressed by the larger patriarchal society in which these households existed. This is not to dismiss the cultural and historical specificity of racial or class oppression in the lives of Black women but, rather, to argue that patriarchy should be viewed as historically and culturally diverse. That is, the notion of patriarchy should be reconceptualized to include a number of patriarchies. The degrees of domination characterizing different patriarchies may vary by women's class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, just as various patriarchies may require substantively different political solutions for the liberation of all women. As Audre Lorde points out, recognition of these "many varied tools of patriarchy" will also entail an increased awareness of the many varied differences among women.<sup>109</sup> By recognizing this diversity and the grounds for unity within this diversity, we can take an important step toward restoring women to history and restoring our history to women.

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<sup>107</sup> See the introduction or any of the essays in Fox, ed. (n. 16 above).

<sup>108</sup> Harriet Friedmann, "Patriarchal Commodity Production," *Social Analysis* 20 (December 1986): 47–55; Susan George, *How the Other Half Dies: The Real Reasons for World Hunger* (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1981), 20–21.

<sup>109</sup> Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, ed. Audre Lorde (New York: Crossing, 1984), 66–71, esp. 67.