

CARIBBEAN

LATIN AMERICA
Curriculum Materials for The Middle Grades

Center for Latin America
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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"Who Rules the Roost"; "Women in Caribbean Slavery"; "Panare Division of
Labor"; "The Two Souls of Peru." Revised 1989

CATEGORY: CARIBBEAN: COLONIAL

CONCEPTS: SLAVERY, WOMEN, economics, agriculture, ethnicity

ACTIVITY: READING ABOUT AND DISCUSSING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SLAVERY.

This reading is translated and adapted from a Puerto Rican textbook on women in Latin America. It is designed to teach the often forgotten role of women in the history of Latin America and to create pride among women, especially Black and Indian women, who often feel they are of little or no importance in the development of society.

OBJECTIVES: Students will learn some specific aspects of slavery and will also discover the role slave women played in shaping Caribbean culture and in the struggle for abolishing slavery.

MATERIALS: Reproduction of the following reading

PROCEDURE: Distribute and have the students read the article on slavery and women. A series of different activities can follow the reading.

1. A mock court room reenactment. Based on the legal ways to achieve freedom and other moral or practical considerations; different students can argue for the freedom of a slave or the abolishment of slavery.
2. Further studies. Students can work in the library to find out about and give class reports on a) other important figures in the struggle against slavery, b) further ways in which African culture influenced the Americas.
3. Discussion. Students can discuss the question of cultural and personal pride. Why is it important to know about our ancestors' achievements? Why do you think it is sometimes difficult to know the roles of some groups? How do people feel about themselves if they have no cultural pride? What do you know about the importance of your ethnic group in history? About the role of women as well as men in your cultural history?

VOCABULARY: criollo, domestic slave, day laborer, field slave, abolition, freed slaves

RESOURCES: C.R. Boxer, Mary and Misogyny: Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas 1415-1815, London: Gerald Duckworth and Company Limited, 1975. Ana M. Pescatello, Power and Pawn: The Female in Iberian Families, Societies and Culture, London: Greenwood Press, 1976. June Nash and Helen Ichen Safa (eds.), Sex and Class in Latin America, New York: Praeger, 1976.



Slaves making sugar in the sixteenth century

Women in Caribbean Slavery

When the Europeans brought African slaves to America, they never imagined that they were bringing one of the most important roots of the future population of the continent. Slavery had existed in Europe for many centuries before the conquest of America. First Europeans had enslaved members of neighboring communities and then they enslaved Arabs and Jews. The slavery of Africans was authorized by the Spanish crown as soon as the colonization of America began in the early 1500's. Since the native population of the Caribbean was dying out, due to imported diseases and war, the Spaniards brought Blacks from Africa to cultivate the land and work in the mines.

In 1501, the African slave trade began in Hispaniola, (the island that would become Haiti and Santo Domingo). Slaves were brought primarily to work on sugar cane plantations. From there, the slave trade soon spread to the other Spanish colonies. African women also came to America in slavery. They were forced to work in a variety of different ways.

Domestic slaves took care of all the work that had to be done in the master's home. They cooked, took care of children, did laundry and house cleaning, ironed, and took care of vegetable gardens and raised small livestock. As they were in charge of the meals, they often used African recipes adapted to the vegetables, fruits and meats that were available in the region. Their masters soon developed a taste for the food and so new dishes were added to the typical Spanish diet. In this way, "criolla" cooking became an important part of Caribbean culture. This cooking is a mixture of African, Spanish and native American recipes, spices and ingredients that is still popular today. Women slaves also became experts in preparing teas and home remedies with the leaves, bark and roots of Caribbean plants.

Many women slaves prepared candies and pastries which they sold on the streets of colonial towns. These slaves were called day laborers. Their earnings had to be turned over to the master. Some of these women were roving street venders, others had fixed stalls on street corners or at the entrance to churches or public buildings. After some time, the freed slave women took over this business of sidewalk candy sales, a custom still common in many Latin American countries. Women, as well as children, worked side by side with men in the fields. In the barracks, far from the master's home, lived the field slaves. They planted, cared for, and harvested the agricultural products. Women, as well as children, worked side by side with men in the fields. All that they planted and harvested belonged only to the master. Behind the slaves' barracks were small pieces of land which the slaves cultivated for their own use. It was the women who spent the most time working on these plots. They also raised cows and pigs which they sold in an attempt to save money with which to buy their own freedom.

There were several ways in which slaves could become free. These were:

1. Through the last will and testament of the master. Some owners freed a few or even all of their slaves in their wills.
2. Paying for their own freedom. This system was introduced in the 18th century. Master and slave agreed upon an amount of money which the slave could pay in installments. The slaves received no wages for the work they did for the master, so only a few were able to save enough money by working in the small amount of free time they had.
3. By purchasing the freedom of a newborn child at the moment the child was baptized.
4. Slaves who fled from other countries were accepted and given freedom in Puerto Rico, if they pledged fidelity to the Spanish Crown and became Catholics.
5. By informing on other slaves who planned rebellions or acts of sabotage.

Although these legal means existed for achieving freedom, very few slaves were able to take advantage of them. They developed other means of protest and rebellion until finally the system of slavery was abolished.

Obtaining freedom for millions of human beings who lived in slavery was the work of many people over almost four centuries. In Haiti, for example, half a million blacks and mulattos (part African, part European) fought for liberty. In Cuba, the slaves joined with other patriots in the war to free Cuba from Spain, since they knew that this was the only way to abolish slavery. In the many struggles to end slavery, the most important and numerous group were the slaves themselves.

Women slaves played a key role in the rebellions against the system. Slavery was no lighter a burden for women who worked the same hours as men, often up to 16 hours a day, and who shared in the heavy duties in the sugar cane and cotton fields. Most children were sold to other masters, so women had to suffer giving birth to sons and daughters who could be taken away at any moment. It is natural that the top priority of the woman slave was to gain freedom.

Since slave women were considered of such little importance by the Spanish men who kept the historical records of the time, it is difficult to discover the names and stories of most who bravely struggled to end slavery. Recently, we have been able to find out about several.

1. An African woman named María de Jesús participated in a rebellion in Santo Domingo in the 19th century. With a group of slaves, she sought refuge in the Bauruco mountains. There the group set up a self-sufficient agricultural community. Only years later was she captured. This is the story of hundreds of slave women-- we know only one name.
2. Eleuteria and Fabiana were two slave women in Puerto Rico who took their masters to court. Eleuteria claimed that her master had promised her freedom because she had given birth to his child. Fabiana accused her master of punishing her with a whip. The judge freed Eleuteria, but said that Fabiana's punishment was legal according to the laws of slavery.
3. Many women ran away alone or in groups. Juliana of the town of Cangrejos fled in 1832. Elisa de Ponce posed as beggar and, going from town to town, finally arrived in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1856. Reyes de Manati hid from her master for 5 months, before returning in 1872, one year before slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico. This is all we know of these women.
4. Mariana Grajales, mother of Maceo, a leader of Cuban independence, fought beside her son in the battle against Spanish troops.
5. Celestina Cordero was a schoolteacher who taught boys and girls, black and white, to read and write many years before slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico.

There are many more stories of African women who helped shape Latin American history. We will probably never know most of these stories or even their names, even though they had such an important role in shaping the world as it is today.

(Translated and adapted from Yo También Soy América, Centro de Investigaciones Sociales de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico.)