

Endless Digging and Endless Picking. Sex Ratios and Gendered Labour in Surinamese Plantations, 1830–1863

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Endless Digging and Endless Picking

Sex Ratios and Gendered Labour in Surinamese Plantations, 1830–1863

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ABSTRACT

In this article we study the question why the sex ratio among the enslaved population of plantation workers reversed from a male to a female surplus between 1830 and the abolition of slavery in 1863. We use the *Historical Database of Suriname* (HDS) to answer this question in three steps. First, we give a broad overview of the changing sex ratios in the various Surinamese regions between 1838 and 1861. Second, we study the age structure on three plantations in the district Coronie in 1830 in detail. Finally, we use muster rolls available for the Catharina Sophia plantation in the period 1848–1849 to analyse the gendered division of labour. Our results indicate that both the male surpluses during the 1830s and the subsequent skew of the sex ratios towards females were the effects of a gendered division of labour, in which plantation managers preferred male labourers for heavy and unhealthy work in the construction and upkeep of plantation polders. This led to an excess mortality of enslaved men.

Keywords: Slavery, Gendered labour, Suriname

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1 INTRODUCTION

Until recently, large historical databases such as the *Historical Sample of the Netherlands* (HSN) were limited to populations in temperate regions of Europe. With the help of Kees Mandemakers and others, the *Radboud Group for Historical Demography and Family History* is now expanding this field of research into colonial and tropical societies. One of the projects is the *Historical Database of Suriname* (HDS), a database which will encompass the entire population of the former Dutch colony of Suriname between 1830 and 1950 (van Galen & Hassankhan, 2018). The HDS will not only provide insights into this tropical colonial society, but also into the effects of large-scale slavery and forced labour on the population.

Like the HSN, the HDS will make it possible to investigate new and old research questions that are difficult to explore with traditional historical research methods. One of these is the question why the sex ratio among the enslaved plantation workers reversed from a male to a female surplus between 1830 and the abolition of slavery in Suriname in 1863. As international slave trade had already ended before 1830, and the number of escapees was limited, we assume that higher male mortality must have caused this trend reversal.

Suriname in the 19th century was a plantation society. Especially in the coastal marshes, the Surinamese soil was very fertile, good land for growing sugar, coffee and cotton for the European and North American markets. From the 17th century onwards, a chain of plantations had developed along the Suriname, Commewijne and Cottica rivers. Most Surinamese plantations were constructed in the same way as Dutch polders, each with their own system of dykes and canals. Although the growth of the number of plantations in this so-called 'old' area of Suriname came to a halt after the 1770s, during the English occupation of Suriname around 1800 a new plantation boom emerged in newly colonised areas along the Saramacca river west of Paramaribo and in the isolated western regions of Nickerie and Coronie. These last two regions were mainly colonised by English and Scottish planters from British colonies such as nearby Berbice in present-day Guyana.

In 1808, Great Britain banned the supply of enslaved people from Africa to British colonies in the West Indies, including Suriname. When Suriname was returned to the Netherlands in 1815, the Dutch king promised to abide by this ban, but in the ten years that followed, some 12,000 people were imported, until around 1825, under English pressure, the now illegal trans-Atlantic slave trade came to an end. Around 1830, some 50,000 people lived in slavery in Suriname, more than 85% of the population in the colony. In the following years, the number of enslaved people declined. In 1862, the last year before slavery was formally abolished, 36,484 people were still enslaved, 68.9% of the population (van Stipriaan, 1993, table 44 and 45). The decline in the enslaved population is usually attributed to high mortality. During the whole period the number of deaths exceeded the number of births among enslaved people. The decline was accelerated by the relatively high numbers of manumissions. Between 1832 and 1863, more than 6,300 people were freed from slavery in Suriname, two thirds of them were women (ten Hove & Dragtenstein, 1997).

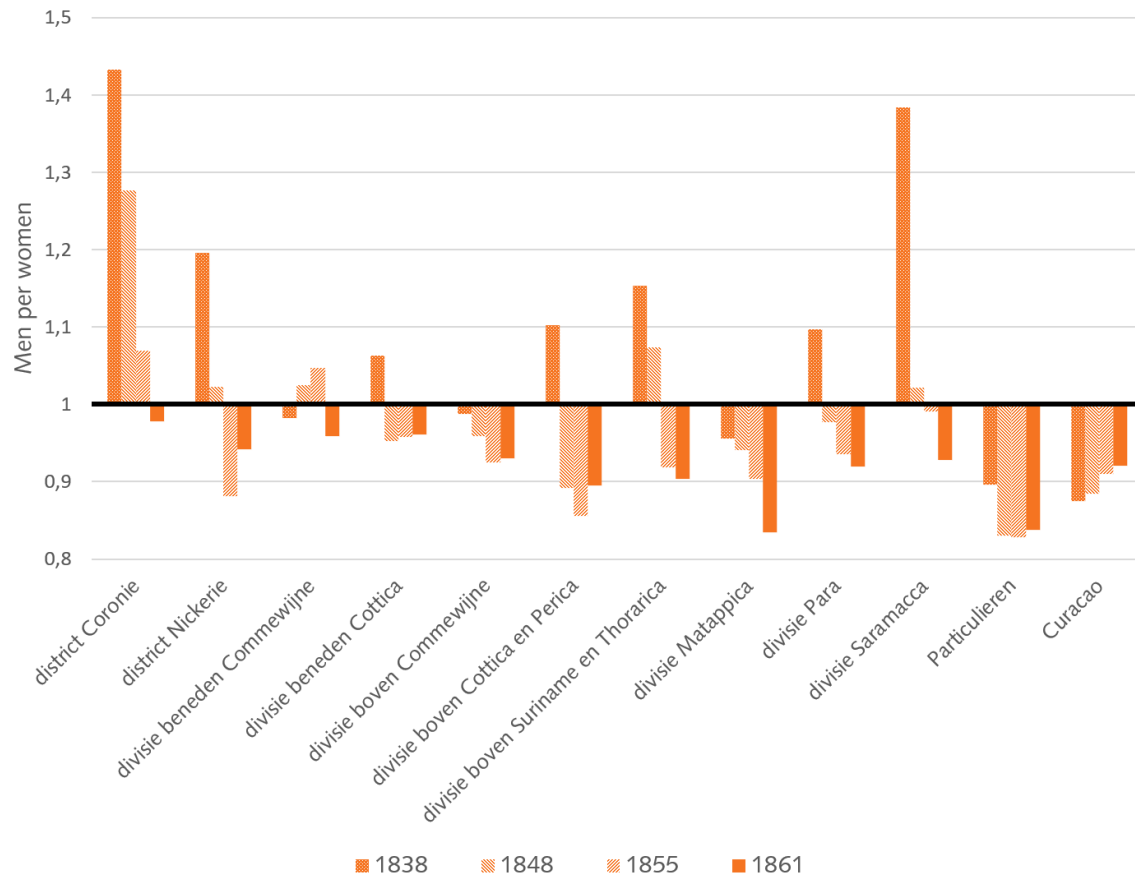
However, the decline of the enslaved population was not evenly divided over both sexes. During the whole period more men than women died, which changed the sex ratio among the enslaved plantation workers. This is exemplified by the plantation Mary's Hope. Around 1820 the cotton plantation Mary's Hope was established in the district of Coronie in western Suriname. In 1863 it comprised 1,000 Surinamese 'akkers' (400 hectares) and a workforce of 139 enslaved people, under the control of the plantation director and a supervisor, the only two free inhabitants of Mary's Hope. In 1863 more women than men lived on the plantation, 71 against 68. However, that had not always been the case. Around 1851 men were in the majority with 71 women against 80 men. Another twenty years earlier, in 1830, the difference was even larger with 93 men against 57 women. Accordingly, in less than 35 years, the sex ratio had changed from 1.63 to 0.96.

2 A SURPLUS OF MEN

Mary's Hope was not unique in this development. Figure 1 shows the sex ratio among enslaved plantation workers in the various districts and divisions of Suriname in 1838, 1848, 1855 and 1861. In 1838, some regions including Coronie had an extreme male surplus, whereas the sex ratio was more balanced in other districts. It is clear, however, that in almost all plantation regions the sex ratio changed over time and women became the majority. This shift is particularly remarkable given that far more women than men were freed

before the abolition of slavery in 1863. Based on these initial findings, we aim to find answers to the following two research questions: what was the cause of the male surplus of enslaved plantation workers in Suriname in the 1830s and what caused the heavy male mortality which changed the sex ratio into a women's surplus within 35 years?

Figure 1 Sex ratio among enslaved plantation workers in the various districts and divisions of Suriname in 1838, 1848, 1855 and 1861.



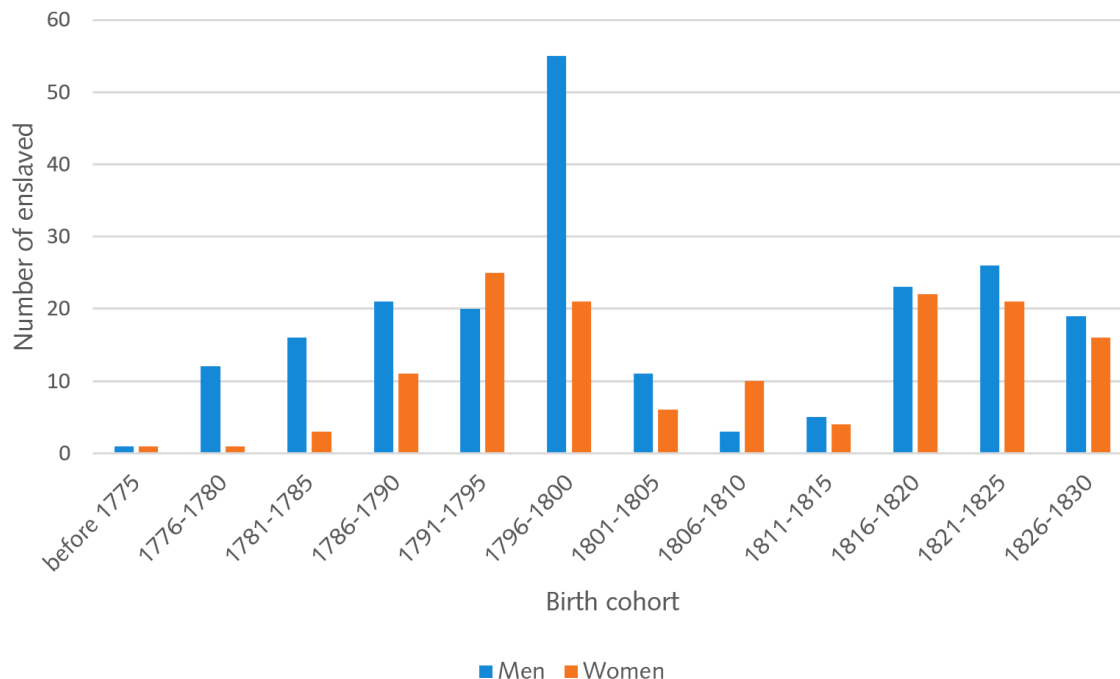
Note: Numbers above 1 indicate a male surplus (van Galen, A.B., Mourits, & Rosenbaum-Feldbrügge, 2019).

A male surplus was not standard on slave plantations. Van Stipriaan argued that there was only a male surplus in the construction phase of the plantations because plantation owners preferred to buy men to do the heavy reclamation work when plantations were set up. After the construction of new plantations stopped in the older part of the colony, the sex ratio levelled out: on the plantations van Stipriaan researched, it fell from 1.12 to 1.02 between 1750 and 1800 (van Stipriaan, 1993, p. 314–316). Somewhat contradictory to this argument, van Stipriaan also hypothesised that the situation around 1830 was an exception, mainly due to the fact that in the 1820s, plantation owners seized their last chance to 'stock up' their workforce by buying young men from Africa on a large scale. He saw the drop in the sex ratio as a normalisation of the situation.

Using the HDS database of the Surinamese slave registers, it is possible to test van Stipriaan's hypotheses. As mentioned above, figure 1 shows that there were major differences within Suriname. Especially in the old plantation areas in Commewijne, Cottica and Matappica, there was no or only a limited surplus of men. The surplus in 1838 was the largest in the recently reclaimed areas of Saramacca, Coronie and Nickerie. This indicates that the male surplus was not the result of a general preference for the purchase of young men from Africa in the 1820s. In contrast, the picture fits better with van Stipriaan's first hypothesis that men had been bought for specific regions where new plantations had been constructed.

This picture is substantiated when we take a closer look at three cotton plantations in the Coronie region for which the age is available of the enslaved workforce in 1830, the earliest year available in the HDS dataset. Figure 2 shows the years of birth of enslaved men and women, divided into five-year cohorts. All three plantations were established in the period 1816–1821 and they had an average sex ratio of 1.49 in 1830. If this was the result of last change purchases of men in the 1820s, then we would expect a large spike of men in the birth cohorts 1801–1805 and 1806–1810.

Figure 2 *Birth year of enslaved on the plantations Sarah, Welgeleegen and Mary's Hope in 1830*



Source: van Galen, A.B., Mourits, & Rosenbaum-Feldbrügge, 2019.

However, Figure 2 displays a spike for the birth cohort 1796–1800 and higher numbers of men in the older birth cohorts. This suggests that a combination of young men and more experienced men were bought around 1816 for the construction of the plantations. The low number of enslaved people born between 1800 and 1816 suggests that only a few new men were bought after 1816. Women were also bought, but fewer in number and mainly in the younger age group. This suggests that women were deemed less important in the construction phase, but that their fertility was a consideration for the plantation owners. All this led not only to an average sex ratio of 1.49 in 1830, but also to an age difference. Men were on average 27.1 years old (median 31) and women 22.6 (median 24). The group born after 1816 was probably born on the plantation and among them the male-female ratio was much more even. If we exclude this group, the sex ratio increases to 1.76.

The surplus of men around 1830 was therefore a result of a gendered division of labour in the construction phase of the plantations. Plantation owners considered reclamation and construction as men’s work and bought male workers for it. It is consistent that the sex ratio gradually became more balanced after 1830, as we have seen in the case of Mary’s Hope plantation, all the more so as the plantation became dependent on natural population growth for the maintenance of the enslaved workforce as international slave trade had been banned. It is also expected that more men died during the hard work in the construction phase. However, this does not explain why the excess mortality of men remained consistent throughout the period up to 1863 as we have seen in Figure 1 and in the discussion of the sex ratio on Mary’s hope plantation between 1830 and 1863.

3 A SELECTIVE LABOUR DIVISION

For a possible explanation of the persistent excess mortality among enslaved men, we zoom in further into the division of labour on the plantations. A lot has been written about gender and slave labour in recent decades (B. Wood, 2011; K. E. Wood, 2010). The picture that emerges from the literature is that different standards applied to the work of enslaved black women than to free white women. For white women the norm (but often not the practice) was that they should not work in the fields, while black women in slavery were considered particularly suitable for heavy fieldwork, just like men. This other norm did not mean that slave labour was not gendered. Even after the construction phase, there were differences between men’s and women’s work. The literature argues that men got the privileged jobs, such as overseers and craftsmen, and that women were worse off because only fieldwork remained for them and on top of that domestic work. This should have made men’s lives somewhat better than women’s after the construction phase.

The first observation from Table 1 is the extreme gender gap amongst the two highest valued classifications. Work as *bastiaan* or craftsman was closed off for women. This resonated in the lowest classifications. Most servants were women, the only servant jobs normally available for men were those of *futuboy*, personal servant of a free staff member, a job temporarily assigned to boys in the age of ten to fifteen years. Also more women than men were classified as unskilled, a group which consisted mainly of elderly people and children. The overrepresentation of women in this group reflects the higher survival rate of women, but it also reflects the aforementioned gender gap. After the age of fifty, fieldworkers were usually categorised as 'unskilled' because they were no longer fit for work. However, *bastiaans* and craftsmen could continue to work until a higher age.

However, we should emphasise that the four *bastiaans* and sixteen craftsmen on the plantation were a select group among the 121 men on the plantation. More than half of the men worked in the field as skilled or semi-skilled labourer, 66 men next to 68 women. So, for the majority of plantation workers there seems to have been little difference between men's and women's work, but here, too, the devil is in the detail. Unlike women, men were not field workers all year round. In certain parts of the year they had to work as diggers who worked on the maintenance of the canals, dykes and ditches of the plantation. As mentioned before, Surinamese plantations were mainly located in the coastal marshes and were constructed in the same way as Dutch polders. A 400-hectare plantation such as Catharina Sophia could easily have seven kilometres of canals and ditches. Those ditches had to be kept clean continuously, otherwise they would quickly silt up in the sultry Surinamese climate.

Digger's work was heavy and unhealthy, because it often meant working in water all day in a tropical climate. The muster rolls of 1848 show the toll this work took on adult men as they specifically recorded which people were seriously ill. In January 1848, when no one was working as a digger, there were three sick men among the skilled men. In April 1848, however, thirty men were designated as diggers and according to the muster roll of that month a disease had broken out among the skilled workers. Nine women fell ill, but the number of sick men was much higher: twenty skilled men were ill, including thirteen of the thirty skilled workers designated as diggers. One of them died. What diseases these people had is not recorded, but we can assume that water-related diseases and infections played an important role here. The heavy and unhealthy work of the diggers, which was done by men, may explain why adult men were still 40% more likely to die than adult women in Catharina Sophia plantation between 1851 and 1863, according to the slave registers.

4 CONCLUSION

To show some of the research possibilities of the Historical Database of Suriname we used different datasets to research the question why the sex ratio among the enslaved plantation workers reversed from a male to a female surplus between 1830 and the abolition of slavery in Suriname in 1863. We suggested that this was the effect of excess mortality among enslaved men. In conclusion we can say that this excess mortality was caused for an important part by the gendered division of labour on plantations.

A marginalised existence in slavery did not mean that all enslaved persons were considered equal. The muster rolls of Catharina Sophia plantation indicate a strong sex segregated labour division: despite the surplus of women in the 1840s and 1850s, men were overrepresented in the higher valued activities, and women in the lower activities, favouring men in terms of 'prestige'. However, this sex segregated labour division also led to a very unequal division of labour in terms of health, favouring higher survival rates of women.

Plantation owners had a preference for men in the construction phase of plantations and the sex ratio was therefore most skewed towards men around 1830 in the recently settled areas. After 1830, the heavy and unhealthy maintenance work in the plantation polders continued to be men's work. While the lives of enslaved women were characterised by endless picking, the lives of most enslaved men were characterised by endless digging. In a sense, the reclamation phase never stopped on the Surinamese plantations: the dykes, ditches and canals of the plantations had to be constantly rebuilt and this was and remained men's work, resulting in a permanent higher male mortality that continued until the abolition of slavery.

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