

Historical Context Gender in the Antebellum South

In the antebellum South, wealthy white women, who were part of the plantation-owning class, led different lives than poorer white women and both led different lives than black women, the vast majority of whom were enslaved.

Plantation mistresses, or female enslavers, oversaw the domestic labor tasks of the household, kitchen, garden, and dairy. While less powerful than their male counterparts, they exercised control over the enslaved people who worked in these areas, including training and supervision as well as punishment. They did not complete hard labor themselves, but the scope and complexities of overseeing these tasks kept them occupied.

Women were also in charge of their children's health and education. Their lives were limited to the domestic sphere and revolved around their families. At first their parents and siblings and then their husband and children. Motherhood was a privileged status that was only held by white women. Enslaved women's children could be sold and relocated at any time. The paternalistic nature of southern slaveholding society also granted female enslavers a maternal status over the enslaved people on a plantation. However, the male enslavers held final authority over plantation households.

Social norms kept elite white women in the private sphere. It was believed that white women's delicacy and purity made them unsuitable for the public sphere and also required male protection. Historian Fox-Genovese writes, "women have only one right - the right to protection. The right of protection involves the obligation to obey." The elite white women that were allowed this right to protection were called "ladies." The term lady was used exclusively for white women. Black women were called terms including "wench" or "woman" and at that time, "woman" was considered an offensive term for a white woman.

White women from lower socioeconomic classes had different domestic duties. They cooked, cleaned, cared for children, and labored on the farm. They might also oversee domestic labor completed by slaves or servants, if they had any. While wealthy white women were heralded as fragile, graceful creatures, the average white woman was valued for a good work ethic and their ability to complete domestic and farm labor. However, all women were expected to stay in the domestic sphere and be subordinate to white men.

Black and white women lived in close proximity but led very different lives. There was often tension between white female enslavers and the enslaved women on a plantation. Female enslavers often used violence as a means of control and slaves used intimate knowledge they had of their enslavers to rebel.

Despite many obstacles, family was the essential social unit for enslaved people and was a source of strength and comfort and a means of passing down values, traditions, and survival

strategies. Enslaved people were not allowed to legally marry. With the consent of their enslavers, they could “jump over the broomstick,” for a ceremonial marriage. However, black families were in constant danger of being broken apart by the sale or renting out of slaves. Many slave households included two parents. However, because of the sale of enslaved people, female-headed households were more common in black households than white. Families in which grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other relations assumed responsibility for children were also more common.

Gender was a different experience for the enslaved. To some extent, both enslaved men and women were powerless and in that way, had a more equal experience. Slave women were not restricted to the domestic sphere since they were laborers. Enslaved men were not in a position to be the economic providers for their families, or even to protect them from violence or sale. Conventional gender norms existed within the slave household, with women cooking, cleaning, sewing, washing laundry, and taking care of children and sick family members while men chopped wood, hunted and fished.