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### *Consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on the Development of Gender Relations in West Africa*

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## *Consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on the Development of Gender Relations in West Africa*

*by Mariam Jeromin and Serena Obkircher\**

**The Transatlantic Slave Trade led to a system of inequality in West Africa by enslaving and deporting males while establishing a system of female domestic slavery. A practice of huge disadvantage for women developed, because of women's productive and reproductive roles in society. Women and female slaves carried out most of agricultural, care as well as household work, while additionally being sexually and emotionally exploited because of their gender. The inferior status women received during the African slave trades and colonialism leads to women in West Africa still being discriminated against, beaten, and even enslaved.**

### INTRODUCTION

The Transatlantic Slave Trade as an invention of trade networks brought huge profits to European powers while also increasing their importance on a developing global market. The effects of the Transatlantic Slave Trade for Europe and western powers can still be observed and measured nowadays. Many African countries, on the contrary, today still experience the negative consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, on an economic, social, political, but also psychological level. The Transatlantic Slave Trade further had an impact on gender relations, as men and women were extracted from their societies in a disproportionate way, leading to a different distribution of labour, changed social tasks, and unequal power relations. We understand the Transatlantic Slave Trade to be the starting point of some of these (negative) developments.

In our paper we discuss the effects and consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on the development of gender relations in West Africa from the end of the 15th to the end of the 19th century and how they can still be observed today. We first analyse the history of slave trade in Africa to show that the Transatlantic Slave Trade was not the only form of slavery existent on the African continent. Second, we tackle the consequences the Transatlantic Slave Trade had on the whole African continent and in West Africa particularly. Third, we discuss general consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on gender relations in West Africa, to then take a closer look at women on the labour market as well as emotional and sexual exploitation of women. In the conclusion we discuss our findings.

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## HISTORY OF AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE

The concept of slave trades is not a specifically African phenomenon. Different forms of slavery existed globally throughout all centuries, with Europe not being an exception (Rösener 2017, pp. 13–14). As Nunn (2010, p. 3) summarizes, in Africa there have been four substantial slave trades: the Trans-Saharan, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Indications for slave trading between places in today's Tunisia and areas located in the south of the Sahara can be noted already around 1000 years BC. With the use of camels as load animals, around 100 AD the Trans-Saharan Trade, including slave trading, flourished (Kehinde 2023, p. 27). In the rising states along the southern edge of the Sahara Desert commodities such as gold, salt, and other products, as well as slaves, were sold. Trading of slaves became notably important when West African empires 1000 AD began seizing them as an accolade from suppressed provinces (Larson 2007, p. 133).

The Red Sea Slave Trade in turn has its beginnings during the rulership of the ancient empires of Greece and Rome in Egypt, when slaves were part of the commodities traded across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Arabia. Much later, in the 18th and early 19th century, Darfur in the Nile basin was a significant source of slaves for Egypt and the Red Sea region. Subsequently, the Egyptian government of the time and powerful merchant-adventurers controlled the Nilotic trade, which involved sending a significant number of Sudanese slaves to Arabia through Red Sea ports, while also an extended number of slaves from Ethiopia was sent to Yemen and Arabia. Young women and girls as well as children were in particular demand at the Ethiopian slave market. Overall, the number of slaves shipped over the Red Sea from 1850–1900 can be assessed at 175,000 (Collins 2006, pp. 335–36).

Meanwhile, starting 4000 years ago, the Eastern and North-eastern regions of Africa already had an important role in Asian markets because of the connection to West Asia, South Asia, and South-East Asia through the Indian Ocean. Slaves were present probably because of the need for unpaid labour or because of the expansion of Islam (Campbell 2010, p. 91). Interestingly, more slaves were women, sold especially for their supposed reproductive advantages (Campbell 2010, pp. 93–94).

Domestic slave trade in African regions as well as through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean were present before Europeans came to Africa. However, the Transatlantic Slave Trade can be seen as most impacting for the African continent (M'baye 2006, p. 608). Between the 16th and 19th century approximately 11 million people were violently moved across the Atlantic Ocean, primarily to Northern and Southern America, not including those who died on the way to the coastline, in the forts or due to horrible conditions on the boats (Lovejoy 2011, p. 19). They were captured and trafficked to Brazil or America mostly along the West African coastline. The labour force that enabled the development of dynamic economies and the establishment of international mass markets for consumer goods such as sugar, rice, tobacco, dyes, and cotton largely consisted of slaves who were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean (Eckert 2010, p. 78). European merchants relied on

the cooperation of African middlemen and chiefs situated along the coastal regions to acquire the necessary labour. These middlemen would traffic slaves from the interior regions of Africa, which Europeans were unable to access due to tropical diseases and heavily fortified territorial empires. This unfortunate practice of Africans capturing and selling their own people into slavery is a tragic aspect of African history. Europeans, motivated by greed and early capitalist modes of production, bear the brunt of the responsibility for the abduction of people and integration of Africa into the global economy in the most exploitative way possible (Tetzlaff 2022, p. 65). Within the resulting triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, Africa was abused as a provider of free labour and natural resources as well as other goods receiving weapons and liquor in return, which led to further violence on the continent (Nunn 2010, p. 30; M'baye 2006, p. 614).

After more than four centuries, an impetus to overcome slavery came from political forces in the respective centres and metropolises, especially from England. In 1807, an act of parliament prohibited the slave trade from English ports and the importing of slaves into English colonies, yet it took another 30 years before the owning of slaves got punishable in England. Other colonial powers like France followed, but even after legal abolition, slave trading still was an ongoing practice especially in Cuba and Brazil (Eckert 2010, p. 83). The formal prohibition of slave trade is not to be equalized with the end of rulership of the western world over the African continent. In 1884/85 western powers divided the whole continent among themselves in order to stay in their powerful positions. During this time, in the caliphate of Sokoto still more than half of the population was enslaved (Eckert 2010, p. 84).

#### CONSEQUENCES OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE IN AFRICA

Studies show diverging positions regarding the question whether there exists a relationship between the slave trades, the Transatlantic Slave Trade in particular, and development in Africa (Nunn 2010, pp. 3–4). Nunn (2010, p. 21) states that there is indeed “a strong negative relationship between slave exports and current income”. Furthermore, he proves that it wasn't the least developed countries but the most prosperous and densely populated areas of Africa that between 1400 and 1900 exported the largest number of slaves, and that also the proximity to the external slave markets (like the plantations in the Americas) played an important role in the involvement of different African countries in the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Nunn 2010, p. 23-28).

The consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on the development of Africa can be observed on different levels. M'baye (2006, p. 607) notes that

[t]he trade brought about enduring insecurities, economic chaos, and political disorders in Africa. It arrested its development by exploiting its technological, agricultural, and cultural skills for the development of the West only. It hampered Africa's mercantilist economy by halting its capacity to be transformed into a capitalist economy. Moreover, it started the systemic and continuous process of economic exploitation and social and political fragmentation that Europeans later institutionalized through colonization and neocolonization.

As mentioned before, a large number of slaves were taken in wars between villages and raids, while others were enslaved as a consequence of conflicts within communities or the involvement of family or ('supposed') friends in the selling of a person. By trading weapons in return for slaves, Europeans created an environment of insecurity, fear, and violence and not only interfered in the cooperation and social wellbeing of different parts of Africa, but also keenly promoted conflicts further by forming alliances with key groups. In this way, western powers destroyed pre-existing forms of government, caused political instability, and interfered in local business practices, as the danger of being captured and sold also stagnated economic practices (Nunn 2010, p. 30; M'baye 2006, p. 614). Furthermore, by impeding the formation of larger communities, the Transatlantic Slave Trade also had an impact on the ethnic diversity and fragmentation in present Africa. This in turn has consequences for policies and the employment of public goods such as education, health services, and infrastructure that continue nowadays (Nunn 2010, pp. 30–31).

The resulting great ethnic diversity in African societies also led to different consequences still observable in present day Africa. On a social level, it led to the formation of a small, rich African elite, gaining power by selling other African individuals, and a huge class of poor Africans. The gap between these classes still today seems impossible to close (M'baye 2006, pp. 618–19).

On an economical level, the extraction of millions of individuals from their home had a huge impact on the demography and thus the development of African countries. As Nunn shows, the annual income of an average African person (\$1,834) in 2000 was much lower than the average per capita income for the rest of the world (\$8,809) and even of the developing world (\$4,868). Nunn (2010, p. 33) calculated that

if the slave trades had not occurred, then the average annual income per capita of African countries would be between \$2,679 and \$5,158. From these numbers it follows that between 28 and 100% of the income gap between Africa and the developing world would not exist if the slave trades had not occurred.

On a social and cultural level, the Transatlantic Slave Trade influenced Africans' trust in their surroundings. Nunn and Wantchekon (2011, p. 3222) show that "individuals belonging to ethnic groups that were most exposed to the slave trades exhibit lower levels of trust in their relatives, neighbors, co-ethnics, and local government today." As Obikili (2015, pp. 24–25) argues, the fragmentation of ethnic groups, spreading of fear, and resulting mistrust lead to low social capital on a societal level, which can be one cause of low literacy rates in Africa. Low literacy rates in turn shrink the economic capacity of individuals and Africa as a continent.

Moreover, the slavery and colonialist past has been proved to have severely affected African individuals on a psychological level, as colonial mentality lowers the self-esteem of Africans, devalues their traditions and customs, and causes them to perceive themselves as inferior to western, white societies (Utsey et al. 2015).

## SPECIFIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE IN WEST AFRICA

Generally, West Africa can be referred to as the coastal states between Cabo Verde and Nigeria. As Nunn (2010, p. 18) explains: “[d]uring the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slaves were taken in the greatest numbers from the Slave Coast (Togo, Benin and Nigeria), West Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola), and the Gold Coast (Ghana).” Slaves especially came from these areas because of their proximity to the external slave markets in the Americas (Nunn 2010, pp. 26–27). In 1450, about 20 to 25 million people lived in this area. In the same time period, about 600 Africans were taken in slavery from the West African coast per year; by 1650 about 4,000; by 1780 about 50,000 (Manning 2006, pp. 99–102). Senegambia, the Bight of Benin, and the Gold Coast were the first regions to rapidly expand their slave trade. By the mid-18th century, the Bight of Biafra and Upper Guinea also started trading in slaves, while by the end of that century a large number of slaves came from Nigeria. In general, “for each region there was a period of rapid expansion in slave exports, usually followed by a decline in slave exports in a cycle of about 40 years” (Manning 2006, p. 107). By 1850 Atlantic trade from West Africa to the Americas almost dropped to zero. Nevertheless, the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade did not fully end slavery in (West) Africa, but a new form of slavery developed in the Western Savanna, where slave labour was used for grain production and textile or leather work. As Heldring and Robinson (2014, p. 8) state, with the abolition of slavery, “in West Africa the proportion of slaves in the population was between  $\frac{1}{3}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$ .” Already at the end of the 19th century, the empires of Europe sent their armies to abolish slavery, while in large parts of Africa they kept up their own production sites using slaves. Although it was forbidden to enslave new individuals, the slave status of those already held captive was recognized as legal and forms of slavery continued to exist on the whole African continent. In this way, western powers used the work force of slaves already present in the colonies, which enabled them to implement their colonial rule in (West) Africa and further exploit the continent. The continued slave trade with the Americas would have meant the colonies to be stripped of labour force, the legalization of the slave status of already enslaved individuals on the other hand secured the labour force in the African colonies. As a result, slave households developed, in which slaves could reproduce new individuals subdued to the master (Manning 2006, pp. 109–111).

Throughout the course of more than five centuries, the African continent and West Africa in particular were used to provide the wealth of western powers. This dominance of West Africa led to the breakdown of several kingdoms and their culture and traditions, and to a large-scale depopulation of certain regions, as people were either captured and sold or fled certain dangerous areas in search of safety in the hills or in swamps. The Transatlantic Slave Trade had a huge impact on West Africa’s economic power, as it was mostly based on the selling of slaves and therefore had to be completely restructured within a short period of time upon the abolition of slavery. Due to the economic advantages of slave labour already present in the African

colonies, European powers had interests in halting slave trade, but not in emancipating or freeing slaves altogether. As a result of the slave systems, new social hierarchies were created, leading to huge inequalities in West Africa in the 20th century (Manning 2006). On a social, cultural, political, and individual level, West Africans to this day live on with the burdens of the African slave past.

#### EFFECTS OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE ON GENDER RELATIONS IN WEST AFRICA

As stated above, during the Transatlantic Slave Trade more men were shipped across the Atlantic, while more women were enslaved in Africa and kept by African owners (Manning 2005, p. 96; Brivio 2017, p. 34). While most literature centres on the experiences of enslaved men in the Americas only, most slaves kept in African societies were female. Owners valued women more than men as they could be exploited for agricultural production and domestic work as well as for reproductive purposes; reproduction being in fact relevant to enlarge the owners' lineages and power. In addition to that, female slaves could be kept in slavery longer than men due to economic reasons and because of their refusal to leave their children behind. At the same time, women were more vulnerable during wars and in times of political instability. Girls also tended to be socialized to obey men, which made them easily controllable. The enslavement of women also led to them being excluded from governmental or political roles, resulting in a disempowerment of all women in West Africa (Robertson 2015, pp. 66–70).

In general, even in precolonial times work in production, household, and even wage work in West Africa was female. Several sources show that (slave) women married to Europeans were very successful forming trading houses and even being influential on a political and societal level. After abolition, most women slaves remained with their masters not wanting to leave their children behind. Being more vulnerable without relatives, the risk of re-enslavement was also higher for women. Studies show that female slaves were less likely to search wage labour and therefore buy their own freedom (Robertson 2015, pp. 72–76). Furthermore, colonial rule in West Africa in the 20th century brought about a strict gendered division of tasks and labour, in which men carried out wage labour while women and girls worked in agriculture and in the household. Boys were sent to school, leading to more options as adults, reducing girls' opportunities for a self-determined future (Robertson 2015, pp. 75–77). Colonial rule impoverished many West Africans, having a severe impact on women and their lives, as most well-paid jobs were given to men, often elsewhere, leaving women to bear responsibilities for their children, household, food production, and societies in general (Robertson 2015, pp. 79–80).

The slave trades, the Transatlantic Slave Trade in particular, and colonial rule in West Africa severely impacted development in Africa, having a great influence on gender relations and the burden women carried and still carry in societies nowadays. The resulting shortage of men and their working power

during the Transatlantic Slave Trade led to women taking up their tasks on the one hand and being exploited for their sexual reproduction on the other hand (Robertson 2025, p. 72). These changes in societal structures had a huge impact on the gendered division of productive work and livelihoods, as well as on sexual self-determination and autonomy of women, as will be shown in the following chapters.

#### WEST AFRICAN WOMEN AS WORKERS

When seeing the world in the modern concept of centre and core-periphery relations, one can argue that, starting with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Europe has put itself in the position of being the centre, dominating and influencing the periphery. As a result, West African countries were able to participate in a wider global economic system and indigenous communities in the coastal region of West Africa were in direct contact with European traders (Bredwa-Mensah 2004, pp. 204–05). Slave labour played a major part in production for European markets as well as for markets within West Africa. The Kola nut production in the Asante kingdom is an example of a cash crop produced by enslaved people from Northern Savannas, the nut being mainly sold to the Sokoto Caliphate in the North-East of Africa (Austin 2009, p. 15).

Prior to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, women held the main role in agricultural labour, along with the responsibility of managing household tasks such as cooking and taking care of children. European travellers reported their confusion about the actions of Africans not matching the European ideal of male and female work. It was common for women to function as traders along with men (Morgan 2005, p. 57). In the community of Akan people, for example, women and men were equally participating in production and selling of products (OECD/SWAC Secretariat 2023, p. 33). Even though men and women formally also had equal access to land, the practice differed as women often married at a young age and were then expected to take care of the husband's farm (Duncan 2004, p. 31).

During (post)colonial periods the utilization of women's work played a crucial role in the accumulation of capital in and outside Africa. The colonial presence in western Africa was marked by the production and export of crops like coffee, cocoa, palm oil, and peanuts. The exploitation of women's unpaid work in agricultural production was essential in reducing costs, making Ghana a cheap crop producer, especially for cocoa (Grier 1992, p. 304). Not only the crops themselves travelled, but with the slaves also knowledge about growing crops was taken to the Americas, primarily by women (Morgan 2005, p. 64).

With the abolition of slavery and the rise of cocoa plantations, men predominantly pursued waged labour, leading to men being put in the production of crops sold internationally while women rather produced crops used in the household or on a regional level. In addition to that, women's work was made invisible, because activities like weeding, fetching water, or collecting fuelwood were and still are not seen as productive work (OECD/SWAC Secretariat 2023, p. 34). Some regional varieties have to be mentioned here, as for example in Northern regions of Ghana, collecting firewood is done by men. Especially in those regions however, fetching water is a time consuming



women's work. Women are also more likely to participate in the processing and selling of foodstuffs not only on local markets, but also alongside the highways. This form of selling as well as transportation of crops is done by head-loading, which also doesn't count as productive work (Duncan 2004, p. 25). Compared to men, who work in globally trading cash crop companies, women tend to participate in the processing of foodstuff in private communities, which again is not seen as productive work (OECD/SWAC Secretariat 2023, pp. 33–34). This could be a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, where women were forced to work in the domestic sphere of the owners' household. In addition to that, men were able to go into waged labour prior to women, as the latter often transitioned from concubines to wives after the abolition of slavery, forcing them to continue the forms of unfree labour they have carried out before (Brivio 2017, pp. 43–44).

Nevertheless, trade is the most significant income source for women today, especially on the local level within markets. In addition to domestic production, trading on the local market requires little capital on the one hand, but also generates small profit on the other. Men and women tend to grow different types of crops. Women usually grow less valued crops on a smaller plot, leading to less profit, while men tend to trade in products requiring greater capital and an international market. Also, the access to the market is limited for women, as they lean on transportation owned by men, delaying them or even forcing them to walk (OECD/SWAC Secretariat 2023, pp. 34–35).

Looking at the function of women in trade before the Transatlantic Slave Trade compared to now there has been a gender-based division, where women produce in the domestic sphere and primarily trade foodstuffs on a local level, while men tend to work in international trade like electronics or hardware (OECD/SWAC Secretariat 2023, p. 35). This can be seen as a result of changing gender roles due to slave trade, where women were forced to work as slaves in the household. However, these facts cannot be specified as direct effects of the Transatlantic Slave Trade only.

#### EMOTIONAL AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN IN WEST AFRICA

The gender division of labour and spheres of life resulting from the Transatlantic Slave Trade had several consequences on women and them being emotionally and sexually exploited by Europeans and Africans alike, which led to a system of female sex slavery still observable today (Robertson 2015, p. 81). Although studies show that there already was domestic slavery before the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Robertson 2015, p. 67), the trading of women and girls to be domestic slaves in the colonies – most of them from West Africa – led to an unprecedented decline in population, resulting in a system in which “women were held in slavery within families” (Manning 2006, p. 106). This in turn led to the creation of slave households with “lineages subordinate to those of the masters” (Manning 2006, p. 110).

In 1874 both the importation into the Gold Coast and domestically trading slaves was illegalized and slavery was abolished altogether, giving enslaved people the right to gain their freedom (Brivio 2017, p. 31). As Brivio

(2017) shows, it was much easier for slave men to gain freedom than for women, as women often were bound by marriage to their masters and first had to prove that they were indeed slaves and not wives. If proved, colonial legislation made them pay the debt of the dowry to their masters. In addition to this perverse handling of slave women's emancipation, women had to decide whether to leave their children behind or pay their dowry as well, which they mostly were not able to do (Brivio 2017, pp. 42–44).

Slavery for women more than for men mostly included sexual exploitation. Rape was a tool of subjugation used frequently when girls and women were traded. In addition to all the productive and household work they carried out, female slaves were also viewed as sexual objects, expanding the dimensions of exploitation they experienced compared to enslaved males. Pregnant women were sometimes forced to abort, babies were abandoned on the road, and even having children didn't guarantee protection or lessen the risk of being raped (Robertson 2015, p. 69). With the extraction of mostly males from West Africa, the ratio between men and women in West Africa reached a proportion of two to one (Morgan 2005, p. 60). As a result, "males of the political and economic elite on the West African coast substantially increased their number of wives" (Lamie 2007, p. 16). Wealthy men were polygamously married to a large number of slaves – sometimes resulting in harems of hundreds of wives – which on the one hand bore more children and slave children, while on the other hand functioned as productive sources as they worked the land (Lamie 2007, p. 25). In this way, the population decline was somewhat counterbalanced (Manning 2006, pp. 106–07; M'baye 2006, p. 619) by sexually and emotionally exploiting women, as they were different in status and therefore treated in different ways by their husbands or masters. The stress and co-wife-competition could lead to low fertility rates as well as abortions and infanticides. At the same time, taking slaves as second and third wives allowed men to create their own lineage, which would have been impossible in matrilineal societies, thereby owning more children and especially girls and women, being able to sell and use them at the masters' pleasure (Lamie 2007, pp. 26–27; Robertson 2015, p. 70). Still today, West Africa is one of the areas with the highest concentration of polygamy, with the practice being legal in several West African countries and practiced in all of them (OECD/SWAC Secretariat 2019). Some of the negative consequences of polygamy include missing investment in girl's and women's education, increasing gender inequality, raising conflicts between social groups and halting economic growth (Fenske 2011; Becker 2022, p. 27).

In addition to slavery, young girls in West Africa often were pawned, being given to a creditor by their family or masters. Although pawnship often meant better treatment, pawned women and girls still could become concubines or be given as rewards and wives to other men (Robertson 2015, pp. 70–71). According to a survey commissioned by the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, even by the mid-20th century, females were still being pawned in West Africa. Colonial powers made sure that women were still under men's control and therefore prevented women's emancipation (Brivio 2017, pp. 42–44). As Robertson (2015, p. 61) shows, in 21st-century-slavery gender is a predominant characteristic, most slavery being sex slave trafficking

and therefore female. This fact is certainly linked to varied forms of African slavery and the consequences Transatlantic Slave Trade in particular had on gender relations in West Africa.

The different forms of exploitation of women and their bodies not only led to modern slavery still going on in West Africa, but also resulted in certain ideas about the value of women, which continue to be believed by men and women alike. In 2022, 57% of the respondents in Benin and Ivory Coast thought that male violence was always or sometimes justified to discipline a wife (Agbozo/Kounoudji 2022; Koné/Kaphalo Segorbah 2022), in Togo 47% thought that violence against women can be justified (Amewunou 2022), in Liberia it was about 45% (Bloh 2023). 64% of respondents in Togo (Amewunou 2022) and about 50% in Ivory Coast and Benin think that domestic violence is a private affair (Agbozo/Kounoudji 2022; Koné/Kaphalo Segorbah 2022); in Liberia and Ghana it is about 35% of the respondents (Bloh 2023; Amoah Twum/Zupork Dome 2023). Although more and more people in West African countries think that the government should do more to ensure gender equality and prevent violence against women (Bloh 2023; Amoah Twum/Zupork Dome 2023; Houedey/Agbozo/Kounoudji 2022), these numbers show how deep the idea of male hegemony and female inferiority is rooted in individuals and how it still negatively impacts women in their daily lives. As discussed throughout the paper, part of these negative consequences certainly can be traced back to the influence that the Transatlantic Slave Trade had on gender relations in West Africa over the last five centuries.

## CONCLUSION

The paper shows the links between the slavery past and present gender relations in West Africa. As a result of women mainly having been enslaved in the household and transitioned into wives after abolition, unpaid labour is still today mostly done by women. While men were able to participate in wage labour earlier than women, women still produce in the domestic sphere and primarily trade foodstuffs on a local level which requires little capital and generates lower financial return. The Transatlantic Slave Trade led to the exploitation of women, resulting in a system of female sex slavery that still exists today. Slavery led to a decline in population, with women held as slaves within families in order to continue the masters' lineage. Female slaves faced challenges in gaining freedom and were subjected to rape and sexual objectification by Europeans and Africans alike. These historical consequences continue to perpetuate harmful beliefs about women's value in West Africa and result in contemporary forms of ongoing slavery for women and girls, often linked to economic dependence (Robertson 2015, p. 80). At the same time, women in African societies have also gained independence, making them able to self-determine their lives and futures. Nevertheless, the slavery past and oppression of women in particular still have severely negative consequences for women in West Africa (Manning 2005, p. 98).

In the paper, we hypothesised that the Transatlantic Slave Trade constitutes a starting point for events affecting gender roles up to today. However, while the Transatlantic Slave Trade can be seen as influential to the distribution of labour and relations between women and men in West Africa, it is not the only cause for the effects we have outlined in this paper.

In 2022, 77% of the Beninese responded that the government still has to do a lot to achieve equality between men and women (Houedey/Agbozo/Kounoudji 2022). As Robertson (2015, p. 85) states,

[...] women and girls need rights to pursue education, use birth control, own assets and earnings, to get custody of children in divorce, to be free of physical and verbal abuse, to vote, and to make and break marriages or other unions. In some states, women already have these rights but they are not enforced; in others, they have never had them. Many women are organizing to get them; on their side is the considerable asset of a long history of West African women's activism—more male support in this effort would be good.

To achieve gender equality and counteract female slavery, sex slavery, and violence against women, political actions as well as societal changes are necessary, so that girls and women are viewed as equal and the important tasks they carry out in societies are properly valued.

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