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How Much Did Female Indentured Servants in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania Achieve Social Mobility and Economic Success Post-Servitude during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries?

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Abstract: *From the founding of Jamestown until the American Revolution in 1765, nearly three-fourths of all immigrants to the 13 colonies in the Americas arrived in some condition of unfreedom (Fogleman, 1998). While there has been a vast amount of research interest in the American institution of slavery, there has been less emphasis on another form of forced labor that also played a significant role in American history: indentured servitude. The existing literature on indentured servitude offers a limited focus on female servants, with little attention given to their experiences in 17th- and 18th-century colonial America. This paper contributes a new perspective, a female perspective, to the existing body of literature on indentured servitude by exploring the experiences of female indentured servants in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania in the 17th and 18th centuries—namely, the unfair treatments they received, in aspects like servitude length, abusement, freedom dues, and post-servitude conditions. This paper ultimately concludes that female indentured servants rarely achieved social mobility—the ability to move up the social hierarchy—post-servitude, after assessing factors such as land or property ownership, level of financial independence, and level of legal standing. This lessened ability to achieve social mobility is likely attributed to the doubly oppressive constraints placed upon them by their identity as female and as indentured servants; moreover, when female indentured servants are compared to male indentured servants, they were almost always less able to achieve social mobility and economic success post-servitude due to patriarchal values and gender discrimination in the labor market.*

1. Introduction

In the historiography of 17th and 18th-century indentured servitude, there has been little written about female indentured servants. However, female indentured servants make up approximately one-third of all the indentured servants taking the transatlantic passage to the Americas (Suranyi, 2014). Despite the current literature focusing on a dominantly male perspective of the indentured servitude experience, even the limited references to female indentured servants are concurrently mentioned with those of male servants as both men and women. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by analyzing the experiences of female indentured servants in isolation from those of male servants, acknowledging the significant differences in their experiences of servitude. Ultimately, this study aims to break the male discourse hegemony in the existing body of literature on indentured servitude.

This paper argues that female indentured servants in colonial Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania experienced a compounded form of oppression rooted in gendered labor hierarchies and patriarchal legal structures, which significantly curtailed their chances of achieving post-servitude social or economic advancement. The paper specifically focuses on specific regions due to the abundance and variety of servant records in those areas (Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania). This paper begins by acknowledging the progression of events, starting from the fall of the old manorial system in England to the rise of indentured servitude and the development of colonial society structures in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Then, it examines, through case studies and legal records, how gender disparities are manifested in the longer and more coercive servitude contracts, heightened vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse from their masters, and the smaller amount of freedom dues received when completing servitude. With these examinations, the paper ultimately concludes that female indentured servants were almost always less able to achieve social mobility and economic success post-servitude

than male servants due to the oppressive restraints they received not only as women but also as indentured servants.

2. Historical Background

2.1. Origins of Indentured Servitude

By the seventeenth century, the old manorial system had faded, and the English Reformation freed people from depending on the Roman Catholic church for land and charity, posing a challenge to the poorer working population as people were pushed from being dependent on their master and the church into being independent in their job search (Lawson, 2018), and hence leading to increased poverty rates and vagrants in Stuart England. The poor were being sent to institutions, where they were incarcerated and forced into labor. When the English first founded the colony of Virginia in 1607, Virginia naturally became the "dumping ground" for the poor and criminals of England, freeing the English of their poor population and the need to amend their criminal system. The forced labor system that these poor and criminal immigrants entered into is known as indentured servitude, where individuals are bound to labor for a certain master under an indentured contract.

There are mainly three types of indentured servants, with two contracting their labor voluntarily and one involuntarily: First, servants who signed an indentured contract with a merchant or shipmaster in their homeland, who are often under the expectation of doing domestic labor once arriving in colonial America. Second, redemptioners or free-willers—mostly women seeking a better life—did not sign an indentured contract before embarking on their journey. Rather, they would agree with the ship captains to transport them first, and after arriving in the Americas, given a certain period to find someone who would help them pay the cost of their passage, usually by signing a contract. Lastly, vagrants and felons were transported involuntarily, often as an alternative to capital punishment.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Chesapeake colonies, namely Virginia and Maryland, depended upon the staple tobacco crop, and their economic dependence on tobacco plantations led to a large demand for labor. To meet this large demand for labor, the planters relied upon the migration of indentured servants to labor on their tobacco plantations. The trade of indentured servants for merchants who imported staple crops from the colonies occurred naturally due to how indentured servants could be directly exchanged for produce (Galenson, 1977). At that time, the price of buying African slaves exceeded the cost of indentured servants (Delao, 2021), hence making indentured servitude the dominant labor source in the Chesapeake region. Similarly, Pennsylvania utilized indentured servitude initially to help build the rural economy and later to meet the demands of an urban market economy. As the development of wheat production and overseas trade improved the economy, new occupations like local shipbuilding, manufacturing of cloth, shoes, and furniture, and labor associated with Pennsylvania's merchant businesses drove up the demand for labor (Delao, 2021). Because of both a large supply of indentured servants from England—as state authorities wished to drive out the poor population—combined with a large demand for labor to use for tobacco plantations in colonial America, indentured servitude became the dominant labor force in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

2.2. Female Indentured Servants

Because both the Chesapeake colonies and Pennsylvania's economies depended largely upon field labor, for tobacco plantations in the Chesapeake and wheat production in Pennsylvania, the type of labor demanded was largely physically demanding. Because of this, the economies of these colonies already placed female indentured servants at a disadvantage when recruited for labor. Hence, most female indentured servants at the time were demanded not for labor but rather to balance the uneven sex ratio. Female indentured servants can be subjects for marriage, critical for family formation. Specifically, it is noted in Virginia that there is a "concerted effort to recruit reputable women of marriageable age to create a family-based society of independent householders" (Mussel white, Mancall, & Horn, 2019, p. 9) and that plans for the colony included "the dispatch of large numbers of female colonists to establish families" (Mussel white, Mancall, & Horn, 2019, p. 10). Such efforts, such as this described reform effort by Sir Edwin Sandys in Virginia, indicate deliberate policies to recruit female indentured servants to balance the gender ratio as well as facilitate long-term settlement, as the formation of household units anchors colonists.

3. Unfair Treatments

3.1. Longer Servitude Lengths

Servitude duration was often determined by how well-suited the servant was to labor-intensive work on the fields of tobacco plantations in Virginia and Maryland, and wheat production, shipbuilding, and manufacturing labor in Pennsylvania(Abramitzky & Braggion, 2006). Hence, the colonial society's structure was based on labor-intensive work, which already placed female indentured servants at a disadvantage. This made female indentured servants more prone to gender discrimination within the labor market as they were viewed as less valuable labor due to their disadvantage in performing physically demanding tasks. Oftentimes, female indentured servants were valued at one-fourth to one-third less than the price of male indentured servants (Salinger, 1981), and the majority of female servants in a cargo sold a month later than the majority of men (Gundersen, 2006). For example, on 1772 April 28th, when *Patty* arrived in Philadelphia with indentured servants for sale, while both Mary Roche and Jeffrey Connel were to be sold on a contract of four years, Mary Roche was sold at fourteen pounds and six shillings while Jeffrey Connell was sold at seventeen pounds, illustrating how female indentured servants were worth less than the male indentured servant under the same servitude length. In this case, if Mary Roche wanted to raise her labor value, she was forced to either work for a longer period than four years or enter into a contract of possibly more coercive and less desirable conditions.

Since female indentured servants were valued less and less desired, they were often forced to sign longer contracts to compensate for their 'lower value' (Salinger, 1997), with the typical contract length being four years for freely contracting men but seven years for women (Suranyi, 2014). In addition to the longer length of servitude, female indentured servants also often entered into more coercive and less desirable contracts, as their contracts sold more slowly than men's. Ship captains often sold them in lots at auction or pressured women to take less desirable terms of indenture to sell them faster (Gundersen, 2006). This trend of longer and more coercive servitude contracts for female indentured servants already reflects how female indentured servants were placed at a disadvantage in faring well post-servitude at the beginning of the process, as they are trapped in servitude longer and endured harsher conditions than male indentured servants.

3.2. Abusements

In addition, female indentured servants in colonial America were also particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse by their masters. In a colonial society with an extremely unbalanced sex ratio, female indentured servants, with a much smaller population and their young age, had little recourse against males. In Virginia, men outnumbered women by a ratio of three or four to one (Richter, 2020). This uneven sex ratio is again attributed to the colonies' dependence upon labor-intensive work, such as plantations and trade, which resulted in a small number of female indentured servants imported as they were deemed less valuable labor than male servants. In Philadelphia, up until the late 18th century, indentured labor was a predominantly male institution, with females constituting less than one-fourth of the servant population from the founding of the colony until the middle of the century (Salinger, 1983). Female indentured servants' particular vulnerability to sexual exploitation can be seen from pieces of evidence from the Chesapeake region, where a fifth of all female servants in Charles County, Maryland, were presented to the court between 1658 and 1705 for bearing bastards, and which in numerous cases the father of the child was the servant's master (Horn, 1994). On the legal aspect, not only did female servants fail to receive any measures of protection, but instead, legal punitive measures against female servants bearing bastards, ironically, were sometimes the reason why these female servants were sexually exploited by their masters. Acts passed in Virginia and Maryland stated that women-bearing bastards were required to serve additional time for their masters, usually two years, which penalty inclined some dissolute masters to get "their maides with child, and yet claim the benefit of their service" (Horn, 1994, p. 210).

In comparison to that of England, young unmarried female indentured servants in the colonies suffered a greater hazard and were often more restricted than female servants back in England. This is due primarily to three reasons. First, a female servant back in England does not owe anyone for the fare of a transatlantic passage, and hence she does not have any financial burdens upon her that obstruct her from entering into marriage or pregnancy during servitude. Second, a female domestic servant back in England is less vulnerable to sexual exploitation as compared to colonial America because the female

servant in England lives in a society with an even sex ratio and no shortage of women. This correlation is proven by the significantly lower percentage of female servants entering bastardy in England as compared to the colonies, where the number of bastards born in England did not even reach one-fifth of the amount in the colonies. Lastly, she is not thousands of miles from home and hence has access to support from family and friends, as opposed to when she is all alone in the New World (Carr & Walsh, 1977).

Female indentured servants' particular vulnerability to sexual exploitation—especially by their masters—marks a significant difference in experience from male indentured servants, who are exempt from such danger. Specifically, how female indentured servants are sexually abused and even punished for being abused, such as how they are bound to longer terms of servitude if found pregnant, illustrates the double marginalization they face both by their gender and their labor status. This double marginalization further limited their opportunities to improve their social status post-servitude, as the sexual abuse they endured and their lack of legal recourse made them more dependent on their master.

3.3. Less Freedom Due

Freedom dues were typically payments of money, land, or clothing that masters gave to indentured servants upon their completion of servitude (Prescott-Brown & Faith, 2019). In the late 18th century, freedom dues could amount to 66% of the contract's price or 28% of yearly wages (Grubb, 2000) and hence are the major source of capital that the indentured servant usually receives upon completing servitude. Female indentured servants often received less beginning capital post-servitude because they received less valuable freedom dues than male indentured servants. Instead of the male freedom dues of land, tools, or money, female indentured servants often received dues of clothing or items of less value. For example, in the Carolinas, all colonial planters who transported themselves would receive 100 acres of land for each member of their family and each male servant, but for women and slaves, only 50 acres each (Suranyi, 2014). This is also seen in the Virginia Statute regarding freedom dues passed in 1704, where "every Man Servant shall at such time of expiration… two hoes and one Ax and one Gunne of twenty shillings price….All women Servants at the expiration of their servitude shall have….a Wastecoate and Petticoate of new half thick or pennistone a New shift of white Linnen shoes and stockings a blew apron two caps of white linen and three barrels of Indian Corne" (Archives of Maryland, 1906, Vol. 26, p. 256; Biehl, 1945, p. 317). Here, the male servants' freedom dues included tools that equipped them for labor and self-sufficiency post-servitude, such as two hoes, one axe, and one gun valued at 20 shillings. However, the female servants' freedom dues were significantly different from those of the male servants, in that they received waistcoats, petticoats, white linen shoes, stockings, a blue apron, and corn. This difference in how the male servants received tools and guns while the female servants received clothing used for domestic work reflects the different gender roles placed upon the two sexes, where, unlike men who are expected to become independent, productive members of society post-servitude, female indentured servants were often expected to be future wives (Suranyi, 2014).

Therefore, the less freedom due which female indentured servants received upon completing their servitude, due to the different expectations society holds for men and women and the distinct gender roles enforced, makes female indentured servants have less capital compared to male indentured servants to succeed in improving their social conditions post-servitude.

4. Post-Servitude Conditions

Often, after years of service, indentured servants were left as poor and vulnerable as when they began (Salinger, 1983). In particular, female indentured servants fared even worse off than male indentured servants because they not only were indentured servants who were already in the lower classes of the social hierarchy, but their gender as female imposed a double degree of oppression upon them, making them being restrained by both the less valuable freedom dues and the gender restraints that made them missed out upon the opportunity to grasp any chance of climbing up the social ladder, both factors combining to almost fully hinder their ability to achieve any degree of social mobility post-servitude.

Here, social mobility is defined as the ability of former indentured servants to improve their position in the colonial social hierarchy after completing service. This could include achieving economic independence, acquiring land or property ownership, achieving a strong legal standing and legal

independence, or forming economically advantageous marriages. Therefore, this concept includes both economic independence and social legitimacy within the colonial order.

4.1. Gender's Influence on Time of Completing Servitude

There seemed to be a consensus among scholars that there was a dividing point around the 1660s to 1670s where before that time, the group of servants were classified as the "earlier generations" and were more likely to achieve social mobility post-servitude due to the abundance of landholding and office holding opportunities at that time, which have said to come to an end around the 1660s or 1670s as prospects for advancement declined sharply after that (Salinger, 1997). For example, in Maryland, servants who were freed during the founding years of counties in which they resided fared quite well both in terms of landholding and office holding. In Charles County, servants freed after 1674 owned land in a far smaller proportion than those who served earlier (Salinger, 1997). When the economic well-being of ex-servants was compared to the landholding and wealth of county residents as a whole, it is even clearer that the opportunities for those who entered society without capital "were indeed limited in Southern Maryland probably as early as the mid-l660" (Walsh & Menard, 1986). This is also seen in Pennsylvania, where those of the "earlier generations" were able to achieve modest mobility post-servitude, but throughout the 18th century, opportunities and prospects for advancement started to decline. Therefore, the time to complete one's servitude would be an important factor in determining an indentured servant's ability to achieve social mobility and economic success post-servitude in colonial America.

However, female indentured servants were less likely to fall into the group of "earlier generations" arriving before the 1660s and 1670s because the colonial society's reliance upon tobacco and wheat plantations for economic development led merchants to restrict the number of female servants coming to the New World. For example, in 1769, merchant Thomas Clifford warned his captain to "avoid so much as possible bringing women servants [for] 'tis not easy to get good places for them…" (Salinger, 1983, p. 33), possibly because women could oftentimes only work as domestic servants and lived in close contact with their masters' families, which required more detailed references than male servants. The number of female servants only increased after the 1660s to 1670s because, by the late 17th century, fewer male servants were willing to come to the Americas since conditions for workers began improving back in England (Fogleman, 1998). This trend of low proportion of female servants in the earlier years and increase in overall proportion of females in the later years is seen in Philadelphia, where the proportion of female servants increased from constituting less than a quarter of the servant population in the founding of the colony to 40 percent by 1795 (Salinger, 1983), although it may have varied across ethnic lines (Grubb, 1989). Therefore, female indentured servants were disadvantaged from the time they arrived, as most women arrived in the colonies later, at a time when upward mobility opportunities were already in sharp decline.

4.2. Extent of Social Mobility Achieved

Although there are few records about the experiences of female servants post-servitude, we can draw some analysis on how well female indentured servants fared post-servitude to approximate the extent they were able to climb up the social hierarchy after completing servitude from the small number of descriptions of the conditions of Elizabeth Drinker's female ex-servants written in Drinker's diary. Drinker, the mistress of a wealthy Quaker family in Philadelphia, wrote in her diary about descriptions of her previous servants who came back to visit her. These descriptions for instance, include Mary Brook house who visited her twenty-one years after she worked for the Drinker family, demanding money (Drinker, 1799, August 24) because she was reduced to begging in her later years (Drinker, 1799, November 10); Bettey Burge, who worked for the Drinker family before 1796 requesting that Henry Drinker, Elizabeth's husband, to recommend her to overseers of the poor (Drinker, 1796, October 17; 1799, November 2); Polly Moore who is as "poor as Jobs turkey…and gets a living for herself and child as well as one can" (Drinker, 1799, January 12). It is worth noting that service in a wealthy Quaker family like the Drinker family was already more pleasant and desirable than working in non-Quaker families, not only because of their wealth but also the Quakers' beliefs in equality, pacifism, and their value on education, even for their servants. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that if the female servants who served a wealthy Quaker family like the Drinkers family even fared so poorly post-servitude, then possibly most other female indentured servants must have fared even worse.

Indeed, this conclusion drawn from the specific cases in Drinker's diary is not an outlier. Such conclusion is supported by comparative poorhouse data, in which the disproportionate number of female servants residing at the poor house in later 18th century Philadelphia not only indicates that upward social movement for female servants who were already at the bottom of the economic and social ladder was virtually impossible but also reflecting the challenges faced by female servants who had completed their service with families like the Drinkers and had lost their means of support and residence when they are freed (Salinger, 1983). In many cases, it seems that conditions for female indentured servants were possibly better *during* servitude when compared to *post*-servitude.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

In the section discussing the historical background of the origins of indentured servitude and colonial societies, the structure of the colonial societies, namely their economic dependence upon agricultural systems of tobacco and wheat plantations as well as transatlantic trade, were introduced, suggesting that these economic structures established close cultural, economic, political, and social ties between England and the New World.

The section exploring unfair treatments experienced by female indentured servants analyzes how the economic structures of the colonies led to societies with a high demand for physically demanding labor, hence generating gender discrimination in the labor market as women are deemed as less valuable labor sources. This gender discrimination in the labor market then caused female indentured servants to be forced to enter longer and more coercive contracts in compensation for their "less valuable" labor and restricted the number of female servants coming to the Americas, leading to an uneven sex ratio in colonial society. This uneven sex ratio makes the conditions faced by female indentured servants unique from those of England, as it increased temptations for male masters to sexually exploit their female servants, with the female indentured servants experiencing more physical and sexual abuse from masters than those in England. Rooted patriarchal values derived from England shaped gender roles and expectations for women, then placed upon female indentured servants after completing servitude, where they receive less valuable freedom dues than their male counterparts, as they are expected to become subordinate wives of the freed, independent male indentured servants.

Further, the post-servitude conditions sections discuss how both factors of less amounts of capital received upon completing servitude in alignment with their later timing of coming to the New World combined to cause female indentured servants to fare less well-off than male indentured servants, as they were given very few options as being amongst the lowest group on the social ladder and their doubled degree of oppression experienced due to their gender in comparison with male servants. Ultimately, female indentured servants left servitude in the same poor conditions as they were in when they entered servitude, and instead of gaining mobility to move up the social ladder, they remained at the bottom of the social ladder post-servitude, with many even earning a ticket to the Poor House.

In conclusion, female indentured servants were often unable to achieve social mobility and economic success post-servitude because of their "wrong timing" in coming to the Americas, receiving less capital than their male counterparts in freedom dues due to constraints placed upon them by patriarchal values and gender discrimination in the labor market.

5.2. Potential Limitations

One potential limitation of this research is its narrow focus on the group of female indentured servants, as this research was centered upon the female indentured servants coming from England and England's influence on the colonies' societies. However, it is worth noting that English indentured servants were not the only group of indentured servants in the Americas during this period, as there were also other European groups immigrating as indentured servants, Native American indentured servants, as well as African American indentured servants.

Furthermore, by focusing upon specifically the regions of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, this paper also has a relatively narrow regional focus which might limit the broader applicability of its findings since other regions, such as the New England and Southern colonies, may contain different economic structures than that of the Chesapeake regions and Pennsylvania which may lead to varied experiences of the female indentured servants in those areas.

5.3. Areas for Future Study

One important area for future research lies in the area of uncertainty in current literature upon the extent to which variations from the environment of England, such as uneven sex ratio, lower life expectancy, and lack of kinship ties in the Americas, might have played a role in reinforcing or weakening gender restrictions upon women and female indentured servants.

As previously mentioned, another possible area requiring more research is expanding the scope of this paper to other colonial regions. Examples include expanding the scope of research to the New England colonies, the Southern colonies, or the Caribbean. In addition, one could also look at a larger group of indentured servants, such as ones not from England or Ireland. For example, analyzing Native American indentured servants, African American indentured servants, or other European indentured servants, like ones from Germany, could also provide a more comprehensive view of how possibly different backgrounds also play a role in how female indentured servants are treated.

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