

Women, Girls, and the Precarity of Freedom in West Central Africa

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Abstract :

This paper examines how free women and girls in West Central Africa became enslaved during the era of the transatlantic slave trade. It draws on archival sources from the *Arquivo Nacional de Angola*, the *Bispado da Biblioteca de Luanda*, the *Tribunal da Comarca de Benguela*, the *Arquivo Historico Ultramarino*, the *Torre do Tombo*, and the *Arquivo Nacional do Rio de Janeiro*. West Central Africans across all social strata (nobles, peasants, traders, and the destitute) faced significant vulnerability to capture and enslavement. Women and girls, however, were disproportionately targeted due to heightened demand for their productive and reproductive labor within local states, chiefdoms, and communities. In urban centers, enslaved women performed skilled work, while documentary records reveal that those classified as *agregadas* (economically dependent individuals) occupied distinct positions within systems of unfreedom. By examining individual cases, this paper illuminates the gendered dimensions of slavery in West Central Africa.

The ability of free men to accumulate enslaved women and reproduce with them strengthened male importance in lineages and weakened matrilineal descent since those offspring belonged to the father's lineage. By disrupting matrilineal inheritance systems, the enslavement of women and girls systematically weakened the political and social authority of free women across the region. Recognizing the complexities and variations of threats women faced is essential to understanding the background of those who were forcibly shipped to the Americas, while acknowledging that an important number of girls and women remained enslaved in the region.