

Enslaved African Women and childbirth

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“Fanny has had six children; all dead but one, she came to beg to have her work in the field lightened.

Nanny has had three children; two of them are dead. She came to implore that the rule of sending them into the field three weeks after their confinement might be altered.

Leah, Caesar's wife, has had six children; three are dead.

Sophy, Lewis's wife, came to beg for some old line. She is suffering fearfully; has had ten children; five of them all dead. The principal favor she asked was a piece of meat, which I gave her.

Sally, Scipio's wife, has had two miscarriages and three children born, one of whom is dead. She came complaining of incessant pain and weakness in her back. This woman was a mullatto daughter of a slave called Sophy, by a white man of the name of Walker who visited the plantation.

Charlotte, Renty's wife, has had two miscarriages, and was with child again. She was almost crippled with rheumatism, and showed me a pair of poor swollen knees that made my heart ache. I have promised her a pair of flannel trousers, which I must forthwith see about making. Sarah, Stephen's wife; this woman's case and history alike are deplorable. She has had four miscarriages, had brought seven children into the world, five of whom were dead, and was again with child. She complained of dreadful pains in the back, and an internal tumor which swells with the exertion of working in the fields; probably I think, it is ruptured.... I suppose her constant childbearing and hard labor in the fields at the same time may have produced... temporary insanity...”

African women were actively enslaved and forced to work on plantations in the same conditions as their male counterparts. They were given no ‘special privileges’ when they became pregnant. They were often undernourished and overworked which affected their ability sustain safe and healthy pregnancies. Many of these women suffered the repeated tragedies of miscarriage, still birth and death. The above extract is taken from Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation by Frances Kemble who was the wife of a plantation owner.