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Citation

Negrón, R. (2020). Enslaved Children in the Dutch Slave Trade. *Leidschrift*, 35(november: De grenzen voorbij. Migratie buiten Europa door de eeuwen heen), 39-57. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3448644>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Enslaved Children in the Dutch Slave Trade

Ramona Negrón

The first object that saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at loss to describe, and much more the then feelings of my mind when I was carried on board.¹

Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745-1797) was about eleven years old when he was kidnapped together with his sister. They were taken from their hometown in the Kingdom of Benin (Nigeria) and sold to slave traders. Equiano was soon separated from his sister. He changed owners several times before he was finally sold and transported to Barbados. After his arrival in the New World, he would change owners again multiple times.

It has been estimated that from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, Europeans transported more than twelve million Africans across the Atlantic.² The migration of these people was forced. As Pargas argues, 'forced migration was a central experience in the lives of black slaves throughout the New World, as their labor, and by extension, their bodies, were continuously reallocated across space according to the demands of various slave economies.'³ The Atlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in human history. While various slave studies have examined different aspects of the transatlantic slave trade, it remains unclear how, in Mustakeem's words, 'a significantly high number of children were not only forced into slavery but were also purchased, boarded on a ship, and transported through a slaving voyage.'⁴ This article aims to answer these questions by examining the role of children in the Dutch slave trade, subsequently their role in contracts and instructions, the trade on the African coast, the Middle Passage and the sale

¹ O. Equiano, *The life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African* (Mineola 1999) 31.

² R. van Welie, 'Slave trading and slavery in the Dutch colonial empire: a global comparison', *NWTG* 82.1 & 2 (2008) 52. It has been estimated that the Dutch were responsible for the forced migrations of 554, 300 African people in the transatlantic slave trade.

³ D. A. Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (New York 2015) 2.

⁴ S. M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana 2016) 167.

in Suriname.⁵ By analyzing various Dutch slave ships and accounts, the experiences of enslaved children during the slave trade can be constructed.

The contracts and instructions

For a long time, the main player in the Dutch slave trade was the Dutch West India Company (WIC). The trading company was originally established in 1621, but reestablished in 1674 after financial difficulties. With the reestablishment, the WIC maintained its monopoly on the slave trade, to the great disappointment of many private merchants. Discussions about opening up the slave trade for private trade and slave smugglers continued to threaten the company. In 1730, when the WIC charter had to be renewed for an additional thirty years, the States General forced a reduction in the WIC monopoly. The WIC maintained its monopoly on the Gold Coast and also retained the exclusive right to import enslaved people in Suriname. But if they purchased a permit, private merchants were now free to trade elsewhere on the African coast and in the Caribbean. Many merchants, however, were still unsatisfied because they wanted full access to the slave trade. In the 1730s, the WIC finally gave up its last monopolies: in 1734 the trade on the Gold Coast and in 1738 the trade in Suriname. The Society of Suriname immediately placed advertisements in Dutch newspapers to encourage merchants to import enslaved people in Suriname.⁶ Almost 80% of the enslaved people shipped to the Dutch colonies were sold in Suriname, according to Den Heijer.⁷

The largest private shipping company ever known in the Dutch Republic was the Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie (MCC), founded in 1720.⁸ In theory, the company only traded within Europe. In practice, however, the company illegally traded with the Spanish colonies in the

⁵ This article is an edited version of chapter two of my master thesis: *The Enslaved Children of the Dutch World: Trade, Plantations, and Households in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden University, 2020).

⁶ J. Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge 1990) 201-205; H. den Heijer, *Goud, ivoor en slaven: scheepvaart en handel van de Tweede Westindische Compagnie op Afrika, 1674-1740* (Zutphen 1997) 360; L. Balai, *Slavenschip Leusden: moord aan de monding van de Maronijnerivier* (Zutphen 2013) 169.

⁷ Heijer, *Goud, ivoor en slaven*, 366.

⁸ Ibidem, 367.

Americas and Suriname.⁹ After the abolition of the WIC monopoly, the MCC started to focus on the trade in Africa. Many of the directors of MCC were already familiar with the slave trade, either by information from the WIC or former involvement in smuggling voyages. The first MCC-ship that left Middelburg for the slave trade was the *Hof van Holland* in 1732. The voyage, however, was unsuccessful, with a loss of 17.500 guilders. The slave trade of the MCC was most profitable in the 1760s and 1770s.¹⁰ Besides the MCC, there were many more merchants interested in the slave trade. Smaller trading companies sent their ships to the coasts of Africa and the Dutch colonies for the slave trade.

Contracts of the WIC, MCC, and private merchants offer important insight into the role of enslaved children in the Dutch slave trade. It is generally believed that in the Dutch slave trade, captives that were bought were usually between the ages of fifteen and thirty-six years old.¹¹ This implies that captives in this age group were considered most valuable in the slave

Trader	Number of enslaved people	Ratio	Age group
WIC	Depends on ship size; piezas de indias	$\frac{2}{3}$ men $\frac{1}{3}$ women	15-36 years <15 years discount
MCC	As many as possible	Not specified	Not specified
Jochem Matthijs and Coenraad Smitt (Amsterdam)	320	$\frac{2}{3}$ men $\frac{1}{3}$ women, but $\frac{1}{2}$ also allowed	10-20 years

Table 1: Specifications in contracts and instructions of the WIC, MCC, and private shipping company Jochem Matthijs and Coenraad Smitt. Source: see note 12.

trade. There are two reasonable arguments for this. One, captives aged between fifteen and thirty-six were reproductive and could thus ‘produce’ new laborers. Two, captives in this age group were most productive. They could do the harsh plantation that elderly captives were incapable of doing.

⁹ R. Paesie, *Geschiedenis van de MCC: opkomst, bloei en ondergang* (Zutphen 2014) 71, 85.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 96.

¹¹ Balai, *Slavenschip Leusden*, 20.

This means that the age of fifteen not only symbolized the beginning of adulthood, but also the end of childhood.

This idea is, however, problematic. The idea that the Dutch preferred to trade in captives in the age group fifteen to thirty-six years is based on WIC-contracts. When we compare WIC-contracts with contracts and instructions from the MCC and private traders, the age group that was considered most productive differs immensely. The preferred age group seems to have been an individual choice rather than a general belief. In table 1 contracts from the WIC, MCC, and the private shipping company Jochem Matthijs and Coenraad Smitt in Amsterdam are compared.¹² According to WIC-contracts, captives older than 37 years were not considered saleable. Younger captives (<15 years) were allowed to be purchased but would be sold in discounts: 18-14 years three for the price of two, and 2-7 years two for the price of one. Infants were not considered saleable individually, they followed their mothers. Two-thirds had to consist of men, one-third of women. As Balai argues, however, it is likely that over time the WIC deviated from its strict contracts and that eventually, every saleable captive was taken.¹³ How many captives had to be transported to the colonies depended on the size of the ship. In one contract, for instance, 250 captives had to be sold in Suriname, while the WIC-ship the *Leusden* could carry 750 captives.

The Smitts owned a private shipping company in Amsterdam and were involved in the Transatlantic slave trade. From three of their ships, the *Nicolaas*, the *Surinaamse Welvaart*, and the *Juffrouwen Anna en Maria*, many contracts have survived dating from 1756 to 1776. In the contracts, the captains of the ships were always given the same instructions. All ships were ordered to purchase 320 captives at the coasts of Africa and transport them to the West Indies (Suriname) for a turnover of either 80.000 or 100.000 guilders.¹⁴ If less, the crew could not claim their contributions. If more, the captain's contribution would be raised. The Smitts were less strict in the gender ratio. The captains of the slave ships were ordered to keep to the ratio of $\frac{2}{3}$ men and $\frac{1}{3}$ women, but if a better deal, half of the captives could consist

¹² WIC, 1706: Amsterdam City Archives (NL-SAA), *Inventaris van het Archief van de Notarissen ter Standplaats Amsterdam*, 5075, inv. nr. 4776A, 26 April 1706, scans 29-32. MCC, for example the *Raadhuys van Middelburg*: Zeeuws Archief (NL-ZA), 20, inv. nr. 1024.2, scan 4. Jochem Matthijs and Coenraad Smitt, for example the *Nicolaas*: NL-SAA, 5075, inv. nr. 10763, deed 223, 2 March 1756, scans 669-673.

¹³ Balai, *Slavenschip Leusden*, 105.

¹⁴ In one contract of the *Juffrouwen Anna en Maria* the ship had to carry 350 captives.

of women. A striking detail in the shipping contracts of the Smitts is their preferred age group. The Smitts ordered captains to only trade captives who were between ten and twenty years old. This means that the WIC and the Smitts had very different ideas about who were most lucrative. For the children enslaved by the *Nicolaas* (1756-1773), the *Surinaamse Welvaart* (1753-1778) and the *Juffrouwen Anna en Maria* (1763-1769), their childhood ended even earlier. It seems Amsterdam slave traders were especially interested in the trade in enslaved children. Recently, the story of slave ship the *Pink* (1763) was discovered, which was sent by slave trader Pieter Volkmar to Africa to purchase two hundred children and to sell them in Suriname.¹⁵

In the shipping contracts of the MCC, age was never mentioned. The captains of the dozens of MCC-ships used for the slave trade were simply given the instruction to buy as many captives as possible. There were no restrictions regarding gender or age. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that what mattered most to the MCC-directors was that the ships were fully loaded. As a result, MCC-ships generally carried a great number of enslaved children. By comparing the contracts of different trading companies it is not only revealed that slave traders had different trading strategies and ideas about children, but it also becomes apparent that enslaved children were considered productive laborers and that there was a market for them.

The trade in Africa

With these contracts and instructions, Dutch slave captains set sail to the coast of Africa. Many children who were sold to Dutch slave traders had been travelling through Africa for months or sometimes years before they reached the coast.¹⁶ Eltis and Engerman point out that ‘the basic problem is that our knowledge of individual slaves is limited to their point of embarkation – apart,

¹⁵ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 14087, deed 3537, 11 June 1765. ‘...ter inhandeling van omtrend tweehondert kinderen slaaven op de kust van Africa en van daar gedestineerd naa Surinaame en verdere havens in de West Indien.’ The goal was thwarted by three uprisings. No other sources regarding the voyage of the *Pink* have been found thus far.

¹⁶ A. A. Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, *Slavery & Abolition* 27 (2006) 187; B. Bush, ‘Daughters of injur’d Africk’: African Women and the Transatlantic Slave Trade’, *Women’s History Review* 17 (2008) 678.

that is, from their gender and age category.¹⁷ Yet, as Geggus has illustrated, the sex and age ratio of captives depended on regional trends. He argued that ‘of the three elements – men, women, children – constituting these human cargoes it was the percentage of children that varied most from one exporting region to another.’¹⁸ Regions like Congo and Bight of Biafra sold many more children than the regions of Senegambia, the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin.¹⁹ Geggus observed there were three aspects that influenced these ratios: the mode of enslavement, the distance from place of capture to the coast, and European commercial considerations. Most of the enslaved were captured in kidnapping raids or in war.²⁰ It is generally believed that women and children were more vulnerable to kidnapping and men were mostly captured during wartime. According to Diptee, however, there is evidence that slave raiding ‘did not allow captors to discriminate by age or even sex as they went after their victims’.²¹ Additionally, especially in the nineteenth century, males captured in war were boys, not adults.²² Regarding the distance, the assumption is made that ‘male ratios were likely to rise and child ratios to fall with the length of the interior trade route’ but there are no means to track this.²³ This is especially complicated if we consider the fact that most children passed through many hands before they reached the coast, which meant that their journey to the coast could be interrupted many times.²⁴ And as the different contracts from the WIC, MCC, and private merchants show, European traders had different commercial strategies as well: ‘captains loaded slaves on the African coast with a specific market in mind.’²⁵ Purchasing

¹⁷ D. Eltis and S. L. Engerman, ‘Fluctuations in Sex and Age Ratios in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1663-1864’, *Economic History Review* 46 (1993) 312.

¹⁸ D. Geggus, ‘Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Data from French Shipping and Plantation Records’, *The Journal of African History* 30 (1989) 40.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 40.

²⁰ Bush, ‘Daughters of injur’d Africk’, 676.

²¹ Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 183-184. Diptee cites the testimony of sailor Isaac Parker, who described the slave raiding process: ‘... taking hold of everyone we could see...’.

²² Eltis and Engerman, ‘Fluctuations in Sex and Age Ratios in the Transatlantic Slave Trade’, 313.

²³ *Ibidem*, 313.

²⁴ Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 187.

²⁵ Eltis and Engerman, ‘Fluctuations in Sex and Age Ratios in the Transatlantic Slave Trade’, 314.

captives was also a time-consuming undertaking with slave ships travelling to different trading places along the coast of Africa. Captives could spend weeks or months on slave vessels before they would even set sail to the New World.²⁶

No matter the regional differences, it is clear that ‘most African children carried across the Atlantic were evidently sold separately from their mothers’.²⁷ The surviving MCC-accounts (*negotieboeken*) show that not only were they sold separately in the colonies, children were also purchased separately.²⁸ As Mustakeem argues, ‘separations of African families persisted throughout the trade, undermining the essence of human and emotional connections’.²⁹ The only exception was the sale of infants. Diptee argues that ‘there virtually was no market for infants in the slave trade’.³⁰ They were unlikely to survive the Middle Passage and their selling price in the colonies would be low. Despite this, a high number of infants was aboard slave ships. As Bush explains, ‘women delivered children and had miscarriages en route’.³¹ Thus often, women boarded slave vessels with infants. Other women gave birth while waiting to be purchased at the coast, or even during the Middle Passage.

The age of many captured children was unknown. British slave traders, therefore, used height to determine the age. According to them, ‘enslaved individuals were considered children if they were under 4 feet, 4 inches tall,’ equivalent to 1,32 meters.³² Unfortunately, there are no data on average heights in African countries in the eighteenth century, but we can doubt that people over 1,32 meters were actually adults. This would mean that children way below the age of fifteen were already considered capable of doing mature plantation work and were also purchased and sold as adults. This fits with a description from the captain of the MCC-ship the *Zanggodin*, who wrote in his

²⁶ Bush, ‘Daughters of injur’d Africk’, 681.

²⁷ Geggus, ‘Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade’, 39.

²⁸ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1387, scans 1-61; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1049, scans 1-31; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1052, scans 1-19; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, scans 1-70.

²⁹ Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 90.

³⁰ Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 186.

³¹ Bush, ‘Daughters of injur’d Africk’, 679.

³² Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 185.

journal during a slave uprising that ‘seven big boys who [he had] purchased as men’ had sailed away in a sloop.³³

It is unknown if Dutch slave traders also used height measurements to determine age, but it is clear that determining the age of captives was a complicated process. David Henry Gallandat, born in Switzerland but sent to Vlissingen in 1744, described that African slave traders could complicate things even more. As surgeon (*opperchirurgijn*) he traveled to the West Indies and the coasts of Africa. In 1769, ‘Noodige onderrichtingen voor de slaafhandelaren’ was published, in which he gave advice to slave traders.³⁴ According to Gallandat, slave traders had to examine the following characteristics of the enslaved they wanted to purchase: I) age; II) face; III) speech and hearing; IV) external ailments; V) internal ailments; and VI) place of birth. Regarding the age of enslaved Africans, Gallandat warned Dutch slave traders for African slave traders, who, according to him, were not always honest about the ages of the captives they were selling. African slave traders tried to make older captives look younger by washing them, dying or pulling out grey hairs, and giving them more to eat and drink. It happened, according to Gallandat, that even surgeons mistook 50- to 60-year-olds for 30- or 40-year-olds.³⁵ Therefore, Gallandat instructed Dutch slave traders as follows:

...with all possible attention, examine, if the hair is dyed, he has to wash it at some places to detect deception, and suspect foul play, if there are any bald areas discovered. In other respects, he has to pay attention to the flaccidity of the breasts of women, to wrinkles on the skin, if the slave lacks any teeth, etc. to discover and determine the age. The precautions are not necessary when one visits a young or immature slave, because that can be discovered with the blink of an eye.³⁶

³³ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1385, 18 Oct. 1769, scan 33: ‘...en vermiste 12 mans, 12 weijven, 7 groote jongens die ik voore mans betaaldt hadt...’.

³⁴ D. H. Gallandat, ‘Noodige onderrichtingen voor slaafhandelaren’, *Verhandelingen van het Zeeuws Genootschap* (1769).

³⁵ Ibidem, 4.

³⁶ Ibidem, 4, ‘...hy moet, met alle mogelyke oplettenheid, onderzoeken, of het hair geverfd is, hy moet het op eenige plaatsen afwasschen om het bedrog te ontdekken, en altoos een kwaad vermoeden hebben, wanneer ‘er op ‘t hoofd kaale plekken ontdekt worden. Voor ‘t overige moet hy ook acht geven op de slapheid van de borsten der vrouwen, op de rimpels van de huid, of de slaaf de tanden ontbeert, enz. om hier door ten naasten by den ouderdom te kunnen ontdekken en bepalen. Deze

We can thus assume that for many captains it would be impossible to strictly keep to the instructions given to them regarding age, either because the age of captives was unknown or because African slave traders tried to fool them. Depending on the captain or shipping company, enslaved people were either counted by heads or *piezas de indias*, a unit to value people in the slave trade developed by the Spanish and Portuguese. One *pieza* was equal to a healthy male or female captive, in general aged between fifteen and twenty-five years old. Captives older and younger were valued lower, for instance as $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{2}{3}$ *pieza*. Contracted slave ships mainly used *piezas de indias*. The WIC-ship the *Leusden* (1727-1728) even carried sixteen boys and girls of $\frac{1}{4}$ *piezas*, meaning they must have been extremely young but still considered valuable enough to count them considering infants were not counted at all.³⁷ MCC-ship the *Raadhuis van Middelburg* sailed on contract in 1741-1742 and had to deliver 201 *piezas de indias* in Suriname for a price of 225 guilders each.³⁸ Interesting is that captain Jol used different terms in his account and on the sales lists. In his accounts he used the rather confusing terms ‘man’, ‘woman’, $\frac{2}{3}$ man’, $\frac{2}{3}$ women’, $\frac{1}{2}$ man’, $\frac{1}{2}$ woman’, ‘girl’, and ‘boy’.³⁹ On the sales list he used the terms ‘full man’, ‘full woman’, $\frac{2}{3}$ boy’, $\frac{2}{3}$ girl’, $\frac{1}{3}$ boy’, and $\frac{1}{3}$ girl’.⁴⁰ As a result, 192 enslaved people valued at $188\frac{2}{3}$ *piezas* were sold, which was not enough. When captain Jol arrived a year later with the same ship in Suriname with newly enslaved people, planters argued that Jol had to deliver the enslaved people to them since Jol had not kept to the contract last year. By the order of the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice 60 of the 226 newly arrived enslaved people were not offered for sale but immediately delivered in discharge to former contracts.⁴¹

It seems, however, that not all MCC-captains used *piezas de indias*. In the accounts and journal of the *Zanggodin* (1768-1770), the captain simply used ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘boy’, ‘girl’, and ‘child’. The term ‘child’ only referred to infants. On 7 August 1769, for example, the captain purchased ‘four women

voorzorgen zyn onnoodig, wanneer men een jongen of onvolwasschen slaaf visiteert, nyl zulks dan met den eersten opslag van 't oog ontdekt kan worden.'

³⁷ Balai, *Slavenschip Leusden*, 105.

³⁸ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1024.3, scans 47-48.

³⁹ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1049, scans 3-31.

⁴⁰ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1024.3, scan 53.

⁴¹ National Archives The Hague (NL-NaHA), 1.05.03, *Sociëteit van Suriname*, inv.nr. 199, 27 May 1743; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1052, scan 19. 251 people embarked, 25 died during the Middle Passage, leaving 226 to be sold in Suriname.

with a child and one boy slave.⁴² The captain of the *Zeemercuur* (1787-1790) used the same five categories in purchasing captives at the African coast.⁴³ What terms the captains of the *Nicolaas* (1756-1773), the *Surinaamse Welvaart* (1753-1778), and the *Juffrouwen Anna en Maria* (1763-1769) from the Smitts used is unclear, though in the several contracts only the number of preferred enslaved people was mentioned. Considering that the captains would lose their contributions if they were unable to comply to the contracts, it is likely that what mattered most to the Smitts and their captains was the turnover.

Ages of the enslaved	Piezas de indias
>37 years	Less than 1
15-36 years	1
8-14 years	$\frac{2}{3}$
2-7 years	$\frac{1}{3}$
<2 years	0

Table 2. Piezas de indias based on age.

Source: NL-SAA, 5075, inv. nr. 4776A, 26 April 1706, scans 29-32.

⁴² NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1387, 7 Aug. 1769, scan 46: ‘...4 vrouwen met kind en 1 jonge slaaf.’

⁴³ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, scans 1-70.

The Middle Passage

Once slave traders had purchased enough captives, the slave ships set sail to the Caribbean. Women and children were separated from men. Conditions on slave ships must have been traumatizing for the children aboard. Mustakeem explains:

Heavily dependent on their parents for survival, socialization, and a sense of belonging, enslaved children, perhaps more than teenagers and their adult counterparts, faced tremendous vulnerability, grief, and isolation within the specter of slavery at sea unable to be measured or quantified.⁴⁴

Because of the separations, captains were reliant on other purchased women to take care of enslaved children aboard.⁴⁵ Women who were sold with their infants were, apart from trying to protect their own bodies from sexual abuse, faced with the almost impossible task to take care of their babies. Additionally, there were women who gave birth during the Middle Passage. Sources leave unspoken whether these women were already pregnant when they were captured or if they became impregnated during the trade. The only source that provides insight into the number of childbirths aboard Dutch slave ships is the surgeon's journal (*chirurgijnsjournaal*). Of MCC-ship the *Zeemercuur* (1787-1790) the surgeon's journal has survived. From 27 February 1788 until 24 June 1789, the surgeon registered illnesses, deaths, and childbirths aboard the ship. On 29 May 1788, a woman gave birth to three daughters. One girl was born dead, the other two girls died within two weeks.⁴⁶ A year later, on 22 June 1789, a woman gave birth to two sons. One boy was 'not healthy' and blind and died soon after, the other boy died two days later.⁴⁷ In total, nine women gave birth. All of them seem to have survived their childbirth, yet all babies except for one was either born dead or died shortly after.⁴⁸ In addition to the deaths of infants born during the slaving process, many infants who

⁴⁴ Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 169.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 41.

⁴⁶ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1410, 29 May 1788, scan 13. The first girl was born dead, the second girl died on 2 Jun. 1788 and the last girl died on 14 Jun. 1788.

⁴⁷ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1410, 22 Jun. 1789, scan 28. The first boy died the same day, the second boy died on 24 Jun. 1789.

⁴⁸ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1410, 25 Mar. 1789, scan 27. A woman gave birth to a daughter, both recovered on 6 April 1789.

had boarded the ship with their mothers died as well. In total, 17 out of 20 infants died.⁴⁹

Because it is unknown when these women were enslaved, it is impossible to say when these children were conceived. The deaths of infants are problematic as well. It seems reasonable to assume that these babies had no chance of surviving the living conditions aboard a slave ship. Yet, there was another reason for the high mortality rates of infants. The WIC-ship the *Rusthof* arrived in 1734 in Suriname. It turned out that of the 719 captives, only 331 had survived. In addition, 66% of the purchased captives were women, many of whom were pregnant. Infants were, of course, not counted, but it was rumored that over a hundred infants had been aboard the ship. Any further information, except for the fact that according to the captain many women had been unable to care for their infants due to spoilt provisions, is lacking. As Balai points out, however, it is doubtful whether these infants all died due to sicknesses or food shortages.⁵⁰ Often, captains did not want to be ‘plagued with a child on board.’⁵¹ What they did to prevent this from happening was gruesome. According to Bush, ‘in fact, it was probably more common for infants to be killed, as ship captains were generally not interested in purchasing them’.⁵² But when infants were taken aboard slave ships, their lives were still hanging by a thread. Infants were not free from abuse aboard ships either. Mustakeem tells the story a nine-month-old baby who refused to eat. Enraged, the captain severely flogged the child and dropped it. The child died only minutes after. Then, the captain ‘called the mother of the child to heave it overboard’.⁵³ She refused and was flogged until she agreed to obey the captain’s orders: ‘she took it in her hand, and went to the ship’s side, holding her head on one side because she would not see the child go out of her hand, and she dropped the child overboard.’⁵⁴ She cried for several hours. It is unknown if this woman ‘psychically survived the passage carrying the pain of profound loss into her enslaved life on land, or

⁴⁹ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, scans 1-70; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1410, scans 1-32.

⁵⁰ Balai, *Slavenschip Leusden*, 141-142.

⁵¹ Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 190.

⁵² Bush, ‘Daughters of injur’d Africk’, 190. See also: S. Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia 2017) 211.

⁵³ Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 93. Testimony of Isaac Parker of the ship the *Black Joke*, captain Marshall.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 93.

if the emotional wounds from her son's murder became too much for her to continue living'.⁵⁵

Only in some contracts the (mal)treatment of captives was discussed. In all contracts from the Smitts, officers were instructed to 'treat slaves amicably' and to order their sailors to do the same.⁵⁶ The captain was ordered to 'provide the crew and slaves with enough provisions, and [to] treat them well'.⁵⁷ That some crew members, however, did not stick to these instructions is shown by three declarations by dozens of sailors of the *Juffrouwen Anna en Maria* at Amsterdam notary Salomon Dorper in 1765.⁵⁸ They declared several incidences of abuse by first mate Egbert Stam and principal chef (*oppermeester*) Matthijs Brukelman. Not only did they abuse several crew members, they also severely abused the captives aboard the ship. They explained that Stam and Brukelman were guilty of 'abusing the slaves in an inhuman manner, bruising them up, as if they were not humans but beasts'.⁵⁹ The sailors told of several cases where Stam and Brukelman abused captives who died of their injuries, but explained that many more captives were abused and had died during the voyage. One case that was described in the declarations was the following:

...that on a certain day, said principal chef had, in a miserable manner, beaten, hit, and kicked a certain negro boy, who was unable to take his medicine, and that after he principal chef had been away for a while, the said negro boy died.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 93. Testimony of Isaac Parker of the ship the *Black Joke*, captain Marshall.

⁵⁶ For example: NL-SAA, 5075, inv. nr. 10860, deed 1179, 9 Oct. 1771, scan 581.

⁵⁷ For example: NL-SAA, 5075, inv. nr. 10763, deed 232, 2 Mar. 1756, scan 671.

⁵⁸ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10821, deed 685, 29 June 1765, scans 831-842; NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10822, deed 698, 2 July 1765, scans 38-44; NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10822, deed 738, 12 July 1765, scans 168-175.

⁵⁹ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10822, deed 698, 2 July 1765, scan 40: '...slaeven onmenselijke te mishandelen, bond, en blaauw te slaen, en te trappen, niet of zij menschen maar of zij beesten waaren.'

⁶⁰ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10822, deed 698, 2 July 1765, scan 41: '...dat op een sekeren tijd gedagte oppermeester een seker negerjonge, die geen medicijnen konde inneemen op een embarmelijke wijze heeft geslaagen, gestooten, en getrapt, en na dat hij oppermeester een poos was weggeveest, is de voorn. negerjonge overleeden.'

Another woman was so severely beaten that she had a miscarriage and died a few days later.⁶¹ At some point, the sailors approached captain Pieter Lagerboom, who, according to the declaration, had been unaware of the situation, and asked him to replace Stam and Brukelman. In Suriname, they were incarcerated at the fort. A few days later, however, the two men boarded the ship again. Apparently, captain Lagerboom wanted them to be tried in Amsterdam instead of Suriname.⁶² Yet, in 1766, the Smitts paid Stam his salary of 846 guilders, amounting for 22 months and five days of work, from the day the ship set sail from Texel (5 August 1763) to the day the ship arrived in Amsterdam (20 June 1765).⁶³ This means that even after Stam was fired, he still got paid.

In the contracts with MCC-officers there were no agreements about their behavior towards captives.⁶⁴ MCC-captains received several instructions. The second instruction to the captain of the *Zanggodin* (1768-1770) said that it would not be tolerated if any officers or sailors would 'debauch or in any way abuse' the enslaved people aboard on the penalty of forfeiture of salary.⁶⁵ Since this instruction was printed it likely was given to all MCC-captains. Nevertheless, the reason behind the instruction does not seem to come from concern about the well-being of the enslaved, but rather the fear for uprisings. The captain was 'admonished to make sure not to be taken by surprise' by the enslaved and thus it was the desire of the MCC that they would not be mistreated.⁶⁶ It is striking that in the instructions to the captain of the *Raadhuys van Middelburg* (1741-1742 and 1742-1743) the uprisings were mentioned, but there was nothing about the treatment of the enslaved. To guarantee that the crew would not be taken by surprise, the captain had to keep his handgun on the ready.⁶⁷ Either the MCC found it unnecessary prior to 1740 to give special instructions regarding the treatment of the enslaved, or the particular instructions are missing from the archive. It is also unclear how the WIC instructed its crew.

⁶¹ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10822, deed 698, 2 July 1765, scan 41.

⁶² NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10822, deed 738, 12 July 1765, scan 171.

⁶³ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10826, deed 355, 1 April 1766, scans 398-400.

⁶⁴ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1366.3, scans 19-20; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1024.3, scans 11-15; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1024.4, scans 9-10.

⁶⁵ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1366.3, scan 32.

⁶⁶ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1366.3, scan 32.

⁶⁷ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1024.3, scans 4-5; NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1024.4, scan 5.

Nonetheless, it is clear that there were no specific instructions regarding the treatment of children. Mustakeem argues that because the transport of captives ‘focused exclusively on social order’ all captives had to oblige.⁶⁸ That meant that also young children were confronted with ‘aggressive and deadly tactics’ to maintain order.⁶⁹ Children’s maternal needs were ignored, while at the same time mothers were confronted with the limits of motherhood.

The sale in Suriname

Despite the harsh conditions aboard, it seems that the mortality rates of children were relatively low compared to that of adult captives.⁷⁰ The most striking example of this, is the voyage of the MCC-ship the *Zeemercuur* (1787-1790). Due to an outbreak of scurvy, only 98 of the 272 purchased captives survived the Middle Passage. In table 2 the demography of the enslaved on the *Zeemercuur* is illustrated. For this ship, the purchasing accounts, as well as the surgeon’s journal and sales list have survived, thus giving unique insight into the demography of the enslaved aboard as well as selling practices in Suriname. It is striking that 79,5% of men and 60,2% of women did not survive the voyage to Suriname, while 73,5% of boys survived. In this case, girls suffered from scurvy more than boys, resulting in only 42,9% of girls surviving.⁷¹ On the *Leusden* (1727-1728), however, it was reversed: 53% of boys and 60% of girls survived and were sold in Suriname.⁷² As Diptee argues, more quantitative analyses have to be done, ‘but at the very least, the records do make it clear that children survived the process of enslavement, made it to the Americas, and were available for sale in sizeable proportions.’⁷³ An explanation for the relatively low mortality rates of children could be that the conditions aboard slave ships were different compared to adults. While men were shackled at the wrists and ankles, children and women were not. Diptee

⁶⁸ Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 92.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 92

⁷⁰ Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 190.

⁷¹ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, scans 1-70.

⁷² Balai, *Slavenschip Leusden*, 105. 76 boys and 30 girls were purchased, of whom 40 boys and 20 girls survived.

⁷³ Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 191.

argues that young boys ‘at times were even left to wander about the decks’, though it is hard to say whether this was also the case on Dutch slave ships.⁷⁴

	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Infants	Total
Purchased	117	93	34	28	11	272
Born					9	
Died	93	56	9	16	17	174
Sold	24	43	25	12	3	98

Table 3. Demography of the enslaved on the MCC-ship the *Zeemercuur* (1787-1790). Note: infants were not taken into account.

That most children were sold separately is evident in the sales list of the *Zeemercuur* (appendix I). Jacques Ruden bought two girls for 600 guilders, J. H. B. Lousade bought three girls for 1000 guilders, and also the widow Nunes bought one girl for 400 guilders.⁷⁵ Of the three remaining infants, two were sold with their mothers. It is striking that one infant was sold separately. Mrs. Ruysenaar bought a baby girl for 60 guilders.⁷⁶ It is likely that her mother had died during the Middle Passage, which meant that the child could not follow her mother. Yet, someone must have taken care of the child aboard since it would be unable to care for itself. Additionally, it is interesting that someone chose to solely buy an enslaved baby. Unfortunately, there are no further details on the sale, but it signals that there may have been a market for infants.

The other children mentioned were again separated, this time from fictive kin. They would never see the women that had taken care of them during the Middle Passage again and were now transported to plantations or households, scared of the fate that awaited them. Other buyers bought groups of enslaved people, or pairs. The free Pieterella bought a woman and a girl, for the relatively small sum of 300 guilders.⁷⁷ W. J. Spillenaar bought a woman with her infant, a boy, and two girls for 680 guilders.⁷⁸ Another person bought a man and a girl for 700 guilders.⁷⁹ Since kinship ties were not written

⁷⁴ Diptee, ‘African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century’, 191.

⁷⁵ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, folio 53, scan 61.

⁷⁶ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, folio 53, scan 61.

⁷⁷ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, folio 53, scan 61.

⁷⁸ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, folio 53, scan 61.

⁷⁹ NL-ZA, 20, inv. nr. 1406, folio 53, scan 61.

down, it is unclear if these captives were related. In 1718, Herlein, an unknown writer who published a description of the colony of Suriname, explained that enslaved people were publicly sold in pairs, for example one man with one woman.⁸⁰ Sociologist Willem F. L. Buschkens argues that ‘this measure was introduced in order to give small planters and opportunity to make purchases as well, as the captains of slave ships were sometimes wont to sell their entire cargo en masse to some big planter privately in contravention of the regulations’.⁸¹

The veracity of Herlein’s book is, however, debatable. There were rules regarding the sale of families, but these could easily be ignored. The reasons behind these rules are questionable as well. On 3 January 1743, Governor Mauricius wrote about it in his journal. It is the first reference to apparent regulations regarding the sale of enslaved people. There had been complaints that slave traders, ‘in an improper manner’, sold ‘the mothers and fathers and their children, and husbands and wives separately’.⁸² It was not ‘improper’ because separating family members was a brutal act. It was improper because in this way, buyers who had sold one family member, were now forced to buy the additional family member for an expensive price to prevent losing the already bought family member to despair.⁸³ Though enslavers knew separating family members was inhuman – they had seen the suffering and pain – the well-being of the enslaved was not their biggest concern. Their concern was that because of this, prices were going up. Governor Mauricius argued that pushing up prices was ‘not only a violation of humanity’ but moreover could only have ‘pernicious effects’, probably meaning revolts.⁸⁴ Therefore, according to Governor Mauricius, it had been custom to sell families together, just as the WIC had always done.⁸⁵ Thus, he ordered slave traders to inform if their captives had ‘a husband, wife, or child’ before offering them for sale. Buyers would not be bound by the sale if afterwards it would turn out that the enslaved person they had bought had family members who had been sold to someone else.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ J. D. Herlein, *Beschryvinge van de volk-plantinge Zuriname* (Leeuwarden 1718) 91.

⁸¹ W. F. L. Buschkens, *The Family System of the Paramaribo Creoles* (’s-Gravenhage 1974) 52.

⁸² NL-HaNA, 1.05.03, inv. nr. 199, folio 48, 3 January 1743.

⁸³ NL-HaNA, 1.05.03, inv. nr. 199, folio 48, 3 January 1743.

⁸⁴ NL-HaNA, 1.05.03, inv. nr. 199, folio 49, 3 January 1743.

⁸⁵ NL-HaNA, 1.05.03, inv. nr. 199, folio 49, 3 January 1743.

⁸⁶ NL-HaNA, 1.05.03, inv. nr. 199, folio 49, 3 January 1743.

Though Mauricius called the separate sale ‘a violation of humanity’, his focus seemed to be more on the issue of rising prices and the fear of revolts. Additionally, since children often had already been separated before boarding the slave ships in Africa, most harm had already been done. Governor Mauricius also had no consideration for fictive kinship ties that were formed during the Middle Passage. Most importantly, the rule was not made into legislation. Even so, ‘an end was put to this rule in 1770, when a large number of estates exchanged owners and the slaves of these estates were sometimes sold separately’.⁸⁷ Only on 4 August 1782, an edict was issued that prohibited the separate sale of mothers and children, and it was promulgated once more in 1828.⁸⁸ Yet, the sales list of the *Zeemercuur* suggest that even after 1782 the practice of selling family members separately still continued. We can assume that for most of the eighteenth century, children and parents, and husbands and wives were, in fact, often sold separately despite rules and edicts.

An important lacuna in the rules and edicts is the separation of children and their fathers. When there was talk about the separation of children and their parents, only the separation of children and their mothers mattered. Regarding infants this seems logical, considering they were dependent on their mothers way more than their fathers. It seems, however, that only the separation of mothers and their children was considered inhuman and undesired. And even though Mauricius mentioned that husband and wives were sold separately and that this was inhuman, the subsequent rules and edicts make no mention of this practice. Keeping families together was not in colony’s interest.

Most importantly, the rules and edicts made no mention of age. It is unclear until what age the separate sale of children and their mothers was not ‘allowed’. ‘Child’ was undefined, meaning the Mauricius’ rule can be interpreted in different ways. It is unlikely that it referred to familial relations. That would mean that no one could be (re)sold, except for children who had already been separated from their parents in Africa. In the nineteenth century, various colonies issued legislation regarding the separate sales. In 1842, the *Código Negro* was issued in Cuba, which ‘banned separations of mothers

⁸⁷ Buschkens, *The Family System of the Paramaribo Creoles*, 65. Buschkens cites Rudie van Lier, *Samenleving in een grensgebied: een sociaal-historische studie van Suriname* (Deventer 1971).

⁸⁸ Ibidem, 65.

from children under three years old.⁸⁹ The Brazilian Rio Branco Law from 1871 banned the separate sale of children under the age of twelve from their parents, as well as the separate sale of married couples.⁹⁰ One way to explain Mauricius' regulations is that it only applied to the separate sale of mothers and their infants. This would fit with the descriptions used in the MCC-accounts, in which 'child' was solely used to refer to infants, and 'boy' and 'girl' to older children. Another way to explain this is that because the rule was not made into legislation, it was up to slave traders and enslavers how to interpret it, for their own benefits.

Conclusion

This article examined how a significant number of children were forced to migrate to the Dutch colonies because of the demand for their labor. The most important conclusion is that the number of children in the Dutch slave trade must have been higher than previously assumed. The problem with defining 'child' in the slave trade has been overlooked. Not only were infants never counted, the contracts of the MCC and the Smitts show that the minimum age of fifteen was not maintained by private merchants. Additionally, contracts, journals, and accounts show that there was a market for enslaved children and that slave traders were interested in purchasing them. A key element in the slave trade of children seems to be separation. In Africa, children were already separated from their parents, during the Middle Passage, their needs were neglected, and in Suriname they were again sold by themselves. Like Equiano, once enslaved in Africa, many children would never see their relatives again.

⁸⁹ C. Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill 2013) 84.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 56.