
Social and Political Roles of Women in Athens and Sparta

Kay O’Pry

Women in the ancient world had few rights. Those they had differed from country to country, or in the case of the women of Athens and Sparta, from city-state to city-state. There were profound differences in the roles that the women of Athens and Sparta experienced in their family, civic, and political lives. With respect to levels of power and the rights of women, Sparta was a leader in its time. At the same time, Spartan and Athenian women’s rights as citizens were similar. Their thoughts, deeds, and opinions were rarely recorded, or if they were, it was the male historians or philosophers of the time who recorded them. What were the roles of women in ancient Athens and Sparta? Were they citizens, did they have personal freedoms? Or, were they, at the time of democracy’s birth, less than a second-class citizen? The misogyny and patriarchal societies of the ancient and classical periods were only beginning to change in the Hellenistic era.

Women in Antiquity

Women in antiquity did not have an easy lot in life. They had few if any rights. Surviving early records of the civilizations of antiquity from ancient Greece, Egypt, China, and Rome suggest that women’s roles differed little from region to region. There were a few exceptions: notably concerning women of nobility and those of the city-state of Sparta. Excluding the rare instances mentioned above, most women of the period were generally limited in education, mobility, and in all things thought to interfere with domestic or childbearing responsibilities. The limited social roles of women in antiquity suggest the common perceived position for women was in the home. Occupied with running the household, weaving and child rearing, the woman of antiquity had little time to involve herself in the political goings on in her area.

A woman’s father controlled her before her marriage, and afterwards, the responsibility fell to her husband. Most women in ancient and classical times were married in their early teens to a much older husband. Marriages were arranged and often the bride did not meet her husband until the betrothal details had been worked

out. Virginity was an important requirement for women in antiquity, as was fidelity. It was imperative that a man be the father of his children, especially since citizenship in Athens hinged on the birthplace of both parents. “The very definition of an Athenian involved not only being born of an Athenian father, but also of an Athenian mother properly given in marriage by her kin.”¹

Ancient women had very few legal rights. In most ancient societies, a woman could obtain a divorce with the permission and assistance of a male member of her family. She could not own land or dispose of property as she chose. Women were unable to participate in politics or buy and sell goods or services.

Athenian Women

Athens was the cradle of philosophy, where a person could become a great scholar, poet, politician or artist, unless that person was a woman. Being a woman in Athens, to say the least, was not a lot of fun nor was it in anyway an equal society. Women lived in a society completely dominated by men. Historian Don Nardo states, “throughout antiquity most Greek women had few or no civil rights and many enjoyed little freedom of choice or mobility.”² There is almost no first hand material to assist the modern scholar to determine how the women of Athens felt about their conditions. “Aside from poetry, women’s writing survives only in private letters written on papyrus preserved by accident of nature, only from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.”³ Almost everything that scholars know about the lives of the women of Athens comes from the male historians of the period.

Only freeborn men could exercise political rights in Athens. Aristotle wrote in his work “On a Good Wife” that a woman should give “no heed to public affairs.”⁴ Only citizens could participate in civic affairs and the only citizens were men. The royal women of the Hellenistic period and some freeborn women did involve themselves in “the political activities of men.”⁵ Aristotle thought that women brought disorder, evil, and were “utterly useless and caused more confusion than the enemy.”⁶ Men thought women were incapable of the understanding required for making decisions in politics. “The difference in gender was what prevented free women from being part of the polis.”⁷ Responsibilities were based on sex; men had the right to vote and women did not. Voting took place in a public area and men kept women in isolation in their homes.

Athenians believed in keeping women separate from the rest of society.

Women lived in a *gynaikonitis* or *gynaeceum*: women's quarters where they could oversee the running of the home and have very little contact with the male world.⁸ The idea that women should be kept isolated from men was one of protecting the lineage of the children. Much depended on the legitimacy of a child born to an Athenian woman. "It was important to ensure the women gave birth to legitimate heirs."⁹ A citizen of Athens had to be male and born of parents who were both born in Athens. No women, foreigners, or slaves were considered citizens. A woman's main role in society in Athens was a reproductive and child-rearing role.

As a result, women became more and more isolated, only rarely seen by women and men other than their own families. If the family could afford one, slaves did any duty outside the home, such as fetching water or shopping at the markets. A chaperone or a male member of her family always accompanied an upper-class women.

Some women had freedom of movement in the male society; these were the concubines, prostitutes, and mistresses, especially the *hetaera* or a citizen's permanent mistress.¹⁰ The *hetaera* were often better educated than the rest of Athenian women; they were taught poetry and music. They could take part in conversations on things such as politics.

Athenian women received little education. They did not receive a formal education in schools as the young boys did, but their mothers or tutors educated them mostly in the home.¹¹ Since women oversaw the household and its finances, they had some basic education beyond the skills required to spin, weave, sew, and cook; "these were seen to be the most important skills for a women to have, along with the ability to raise children."¹² Many contemporary scholars and philosophers thought that women had weaker, inferior minds and were not capable of learning the things that men did. They deprived them of the participation in sports so widely encouraged in young boys and men.

Athenian women, like the women of most Greek city-states, had few legal rights. "Increasing anxiety about women and their roles in the community led to the laws that segregated them and closely regulated their lives" writes Nardo; he continues, there was even a law that regulated how many women could attend a funeral.¹³ Women could not appear in court or sue but they could "avail themselves of Athenian justice in indirect ways."¹⁴ The male members of a woman's family could represent her and her interests in court. Athenian women could not own land in their name, or buy and sell property. They could get a divorce, but a male

relative of the wife had to initiate it.¹⁵ Women who divorced lost custody of their children and had to return their dowries to the family to be used for the support of the woman if she did not remarry.¹⁶ This was typical of most of Greece in the ancient and classical age.

Spartan Women

The women of Sparta enjoyed more freedom than women from other Greek city-states. Ancient Women’s historian Sarah Pomeroy writes in her book *Spartan Women*, “we know little about Spartan women, but it is not so readily conceded that we do not actually know much about Spartan men either.”¹⁷ What scholars do know comes primarily from Athenian writers, men from a place that disapproved of Spartans. Spartan women have been the subject of much debate both positive and negative “from antiquity to the present.”¹⁸ The forward behavior of the Spartan women shocked the Greeks.

The greater freedoms of Spartan women began at birth; families treated females just as well as male babies. “It was the only Greek city in which woman was treated almost on equality with man.”¹⁹ Spartans educated them much in the same way as the boys attending school and encouraged them to participate in sports. Nardo states that according to Xenophon, strong, healthy, physically active girls and women bred healthy children for the state.²⁰ Spartan women had to be almost as educated as men because they were expected to take care of their interests and



Figure 1 *A Spartan Woman Giving a Shield to her Son*. Oil on panel by Jean Jacques François Lebarbier, 1805. Held by the Portland Art Museum in European Art Collection.

those of their husbands when the men were away at war, a regular occurrence in Spartan life.

Young girls were not married off as soon as they reached puberty; they

were allowed to physically mature, with most not marrying until the age of eighteen. Sparta's concern was not for the number of children that a woman could bear but for the production of healthy male children for the Spartan military and healthy female children for reproduction. Women's role was one of maternity while the role of a Spartan man was to serve in the army, but both served the polis.²¹ For all their freedoms, a Spartan woman was still a means for producing children for the state.

A Spartan woman's role in politics was much like that of all other women in Greece. They could not take active part in it. Men forbade them to speak in public assemblies and for the most part segregated them from the men; they were able to influence the community and make their opinions known through their men. Aristotle writes, "among Spartans in the days of their greatness; many things were managed by their women."²² Aristotle felt that the influence of Spartan women was mischievous.

Women in Sparta could own property; they could dispose of it how they willed, they could inherit equal shares from their father's estates. Aristotle states that women owned two-fifths of the land in the Spartan region; he thought that this "avarice naturally suggests a criticism on the inequality of property."²³ He also felt that their laws dealing with property and women were the ruin of Sparta.²⁴ Spartan women did have more legal rights dealing with their properties and inheritances; in all other cases, their rights were the same as those of Athenian and other Greek women.

Athens vs. Sparta: The women

The main difference between the condition of Athenian and Spartan women was based on their value to the state as breeding stock. Children of both sexes were very important to Spartans. Male children were more important in Athenian society even though Athenian citizenship came through the birthplace of both parents. Unless they were born deformed, Spartans were less likely to expose female children and leave them to die at birth than Athenians, who sometimes exposed female children because there were too many children in the family.²⁵ Athenian women could never inherit, but Spartan women could become wealthy heiresses in their own right. This caused Aristotle to state that it was leading to wealth being "too highly valued."²⁶ Athenians considered it improper for women

to conduct business affairs, but Spartans encouraged and educated women to handle business transactions. For all their differences, both groups of women were still isolated and had little civil and legal rights until the Hellenistic period.

It would seem that little is known about the roles of women in general in the ancient Greek world and what scholarship there is has been based on the writings of men. For the most part, women are included as an afterthought or in the context of the actions and events of men. Few women wrote poetry. Some served as priestess at the Oracle at Delphi. Women were living in societies controlled by men. At best, they were marginal citizens; their only importance was tied to their ability to breed more male citizens for military and political purposes. Yet, scholars can assume that they had thoughts, opinions, and intellect as sharp as any ancient man but men never gave them the chance to voice these in public. Their only way of expressing themselves and their ideas was through the men of their families. Their worth in both city-states was reproductive; they were not valued for their intellect and artistic abilities but for their wombs. Yet these women were still important to the continuation of their respective societies and Greek civilization as a whole.

Notes

1. Moya K. Mason, "Ancient Athenian Women of the Classical Period," www.moyak.com/papers/athenian-women.html (accessed March 9, 2012).

2. Don Nardo, *Women of Ancient Greece* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000), 8.

3. Mary F. Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant, *Women in Greece & Rome* (Toronto: Samuel-Stevens, 1977), 3.

4. Aristotle, "On a good Wife, from Oikonomikos, c.330 BCE," *Ancient History Sourcebook*, www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/greek-wives.asp (accessed March 10, 2012).

5. Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (1975; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1995), Kindle edition.

6. Aristotle, "On the Lacedaemonian Constitution, c. 340 BCE," *Ancient History Sourcebook*, www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient.aristotle-sparta.asp (accessed February 27, 2012).

7. Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 39.

8. Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddess, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (1975; repr., New York: Pantheon, 1995), 80.

9. Jargen C. Meyer, "Women in Classical Athens in the Shadow of North-West Europe or in the Light from Istanbul," *Women's Life in Classical Athens*, [www.hist.uib.no/antikkk/antres/Womens life.htm](http://www.hist.uib.no/antikkk/antres/Womens%20life.htm) (accessed March 10, 2012).
10. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*.
11. Nardo, *Women of Ancient Greece*, 47.
12. Mason, "Ancient Athenian Women."
13. Nardo, *Women of Ancient Greece*, 28-29.
14. *Ibid.*, 30.
15. *Ibid.*, 38.
16. Mason, "Ancient Athenian Women."
17. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Kindle edition.
18. Fantam et al., *Women in the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 57.
19. *Ibid.*, 57.
20. Nardo, *Women of Ancient Greece*, 49.
21. Fantam et al., *Women in the Classical World*, 57.
22. Aristotle, "Spartan Women," *Ancient History Sourcebook*, 1, www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/aristotle-spartanwomen.asp (accessed March 8, 2012).
23. *Ibid.*, 1.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters*, 135-136.
26. Aristotle, *Spartan Women*, 1.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. "Spartan Women." *Ancient History Sourcebook*. www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/aristotle-spartanwomen.asp. (accessed March 8, 2012).
- _____. "On a good Wife" from Oikonomikos. *Ancient History Sourcebook*. www.fordham.edu/Halsall.ancient/greek-wives.asp. (accessed March 10, 2012).
- _____. "On the Lacedaemonian Constitution, C. 340 BCE." *Ancient History Sourcebook*. www.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient.aristotle-sparta.asp. (accessed February 27, 2012).
- Cantarella, Eva. *Pandora's Daughters*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Fantham, Elaine, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H. A. Shapiro. *Women in the Classical World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Lefkowitz, Mary F. and Maureen Fant. *Women in Greece & Rome*. Toronto: Samuel-Stevens, 1977.
- Mason, Moya K. *Ancient Athenian Women of the Classical Period*. www.moyak.com/papers/athenian-women.html. (accessed March 9, 2012).
- Meyer, Jargen C. "Women in Classical Athens in the Shadow of North-West Europe or in the Light from Istanbul." *Women's Life in Classical Athens*. [www.hist.uib.no/antikk/antres/Womens life.htm](http://www.hist.uib.no/antikk/antres/Womens%20life.htm). (accessed March 10, 2012).
- Nardo, Don. *Women of Ancient Greece*. San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000.
- Sarah Pomeroy. *Goddess, Whores, Wives and Slaves*. New York: Pantheon, 1975.
- _____. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. 1975. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. Kindle edition.
- _____. *Spartan Women*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Kindle edition.