

Spartan women essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Spartan Women played a pivotal role in a society which was renowned for its military power. (Womens Role in Society, 2010) In no other city or state were women so well incorporated into a society (Womens Role in Society, 2010), which enabled them to have more power, influence and freedom than neighbouring Greek states. (makedbyteachers, 2009) Although Spartan women did not have citizenship, could not hold political office or serve in the military, they were well respected and had status. (yorkiee, 2012) Their most important role and duty, was to give birth to healthy, strong Spartan babies who would grow to become warriors. To achieve this, the Spartans believed in physical training for women (which was regarded as some of the best in Greece) to stay strong and fit. Xenophon tells us; “ if both parents were strong, their children would be more robust” (Xenophon, Ancient Greece). In addition to this, women also had the duty of running the household and had the opportunity to inherit, have ownership of land and accumulate wealth. According to Aristotle, “ women owned as much as two fifths of the Spartan land” (Aristotle), in the fourth century BC.

Women of Sparta had the primary duty of producing physically and mentally strong children. (makedbyteachers, 2009) Xenophon tells us “ for free women the most important job was to bear children”. (Xenophon, CONSTITUTION OF THE LACEDAEMONIANS) They were expected to train regularly in order to maintain a high level of fitness (makedbyteachers, 2009) and strength to prepare them for childbearing. Paul Cartledge tells us that these women “ threw the javelin and discus...performed gymnastics, all completely naked and in full public view” (Cartledge, 2003). To the surrounding states of Sparta this kind of behaviour was considered

immodest. Athenian playwright Euripides illustrates his bias view of Spartan women in his play *Andromache*; “bare thighs and loose clothes to wrestle and run races ...I call it intolerable” (Eurpides). The derogatory epithet ‘thigh flashers’ was coined just for these women. The archeological evidence that supports these allegations are the Spartan-made bronze figurines, that depict typical young female Spartans in athletic (and thigh -revealing) poses. (Cartledge, 2003) It was believed that this physical training enabled Spartan women to produce true warriors.

This fundamental duty of producing children and the job of motherhood was taken very seriously in Sparta. (makedbyteachers, 2009). King Leonidas even said to his wife before departing to Thermopylae that she should “Marry a good man, and bear good children.” (Plutarch) The alleged custom of ‘Wife sharing’ illustrates child bearing as being the primary goal of woman as expected in society. A husband might ‘lend’ his wife to another man for the specific purpose of procreating legitimate offspring. (Cartledge, 2003) This not only tells us of the pressures of producing an heir but also suggests that a woman’s worth and place in society was closely linked to her ability (makedbyteachers, 2009) to bear strong children.

Spartan women unlike other Greek women were educated however their education differed from their male counterparts. Girls were educated in things that were considered to be important for women (Brennan, 2007), such as arts, music, dancing and poetry. Spartan mothers were considered the head of the household in Spartan society, (Women in Ancient Sparta, 2013) and had “to be tolerably efficient at running the home”. (Plato) It was

assumed they had considerable control of the ‘oikos’ (household) particularly in the absence of their husbands during their military activities and campaigns (Brennan, 2007) and sons who left to train at the age of 7. Unlike other Greek women, Spartan women were not expected to learn domestic duties. Cartledge tells us that the “Helot women did the housework, cooked, wove, child-minded and so on”. (Cartledge, 2003)

Throughout the Greek world the wealth and status of Spartan women was legendary. In the 4th century BC Aristotle notes that heiresses were numerous at Sparta. (Brennan, 2007) In the absence of a male descendent, property could be left to a woman in Sparta and keeping property within a family through the marriage of heiresses was a common practice. (Brennan, 2007) Horse ownership and equestrian sport was an elite activity of wealthy women. (Brennan, 2007) Kyniska, daughter of King Archelaos II is an example of a wealthy Spartan woman. She could afford to breed and train horses. In 392BC and 396BC her horses won the four-horse chariot race at Olympia and this was commemorated with monuments at both Olympia and Sparta. (Brennan, 2007)

The women of Sparta were unique among other Greek women and enjoyed more power, influence and personal freedom. However their status did not extend to politics and leadership, and there appears to have been no special public role for a Spartan Queen and the throne could not be inherited by a woman. Their life was simple and straightforward, and their major role, which was vital to their society was to bear warriors.

Sources:

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The sources that have become the basis of my discussion vary from ancient to modern. Paul Cartledge is someone I referenced frequently in this report. As a Professor at Cambridge University and having completed a Doctoral on Spartan Archaeology I believed him to be a reliable and useful modern source to use in my report. His book 'The Spartans' provided me with accurate and in depth knowledge about women of Sparta. At the back of this book is a bibliography of all sources he used in writing it, which adds to its reliability. Xenophon is another source that I used throughout my report to support my discussion. Xenophon was a contemporary eyewitness of the time and wrote about the events he witnessed. He was exiled from Athens and came to live in Sparta, thus one is to assume that his writings are very reliable. His book the Constitutions of the Lacedamonians proved to be a very useful source for my report.

Aristotle is another primary source that I used. Aristotle was Athenian and it's possible that he had bias views of the ways the Spartans lived. It is evident that he believed the wealth and status of women is what ultimately caused the downfall of Sparta. Euripides was another source I quoted and was an Athenian playwright. It is clear that he did not agree with the behaviour of women in Sparta, thus making his source a bias view. However, what he does say about women having "bare thighs and loose clothes to wrestle and run races" does correspond up with other sources. Although he views Spartan women as immodest, what he does say has proven to be an accurate account. Internet websites also provided me with additional information. Their reliability cannot be confirmed as the authors were not

eye-witnesses to this society however their information does correspond with the ancient and modern sources that I used, which endorses their accuracy.

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