

Roles of spartan women

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



Question 1: With reference to source A, what does the evidence reveal about the roles and status of women in Spartan society. In Sparta, women were well respected and had multiple roles within society. They were given more freedom than in most other Greek societies. The main reason for this was the fact that Sparta had a warrior culture and the men were away either at war or training for war. While the men were away the women had multiple roles. The most important of which was to give birth to healthy Spartan children to become warriors.

Some of the other roles women had included; participating in religious festivals, and managing the *kleros*. As mentioned above, the most important role of Spartan women was to give birth to healthy Spartan babies to become warriors. Xenophon stated "for free women the most important job was to bear children". In order to produce healthy children, women underwent physical training. This was because it was thought that a healthy mother would produce a healthy child. Lycurgus stated that only women who died in childbirth would be allowed to have a marked grave.

Archaeological evidence has been found to support this statement. This highlights the importance of childbirth in Spartan society. From birth, mothers disciplined their children and instilled the attitudes of the *agoge*. They implanted the ideas of performing at perfection and were responsible for raising children to conform and be loyal to Sparta. When their sons reached the age of seven, the mothers would freely give their sons to the *agoge* for their military training.

Women would maintain the ideologies of the *agoge* and Spartan society by ridiculing men that were cowards and praising those who were heroes.

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Plutarch speaks of this in source A. In Sparta, “ marriage by capture” was thought to have been practiced. As described by Plutarch, the bride would have her head shaved, she would be dressed in men’s clothes, and she would then lie in a dark room. The men would then come into the room, lift her onto the bed, have intercourse with her, and then return to his normal sleeping place. It is said that these customs were practiced in order to make the man feel more comfortable about having intercourse with a woman. From this point onwards, meetings between the couple were done in secret. Xenophon suggests that this was done to build up excitement and sexual tension so that when they finally did meet, the offspring produced would be stronger and healthier as a result. There is evidence to show that Spartan women had an important role in Spartan religion. Archaeological evidence has been found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia.

This evidence includes hundreds of votive offerings. These offerings were usually lead figurines in the shape of women. It is thought that these figurines symbolised childbirth and pregnant women would make these offerings either to ask for a successful childbirth or to ask to bear a strong, healthy son. Women also took part in three of the major festivals that took place in Sparta; the Karneia, the Hyakinthia and the Gymnopaediae. At the Hyakinthia, women rode in ceremonial chariots, marched in procession, sang, danced and took part in sacrifices.

At the Gymnopaediae, women would compete with the males in athletic competitions. Spartan women also had a small, yet important role in the Spartan economy. Spartan women were required to oversee the kleros while the men were away at war or training. This meant that the men were

dependent on their wife's efficiency in order to provide their contribution to the syssitia. Women could also inherit property from herfamily's estate. However, she did not own this land. Instead this land either formed part of a dowry or was passed onto her sons.

According to Aristotle " nearly two-fifths of the whole country is held by women". The main sources we have that relate to Spartan women all have limitations. Some of the main writers that we gain information from are Herodotus, Aristotle, Thucydides, Plutarch and Xenophon. The reliability of these sources is limited due to the fact that none of the writers were from Sparta, they are all male, and the fact that it was seen has normal to make up stories rather than tell the whole truth.

Some of the information provided may have been stereotypes created in order to emphasise the warrior nature of Sparta, however the information is nonetheless useful to modern day historians. In conclusion, Spartan women were a crucial part of Spartan society. without them, there would be no soldiers for the army nor would the kleros be run smoothly while the men were away at war or in training. It is through different sources, both archaeological and written, that it is evident that Spartan women had some degree of power and responsibilities within Spartan society.