

# [Women’s lives in ancient greece](https://assignbuster.com/womens-lives-in-ancient-greece/)

By and large, Greek women have been regarded as inferior and given fewer opportunities than men throughout history. However, it would be a mistake to generalize about their lives in Ancient Greece. While women were, in fact, considered less worthy than men in their treatment and status; prospects were far from the same in all Greek territories. Furthermore, their legal, economic and social status also varied from one historical age to another.

To construct a realistic judgment about what women’s lives might have been like is extremely complex. The surviving evidence is not only incomplete; but also generally from Athenian sources only. Since Athens was one of the biggest and most influential cities, early modern scholars assumed that it was safe to use its traditions as an all-purpose model of social behavior. Based on this approach, the lives of Greek women in most city-states would have been very similar to those of the Athenians. In opposition, the customs of Spartans were considered odd and bizarre.

Later research, however, looks at the above position quite skeptically and feels that while Spartans were; in fact, more liberal and treated their women relatively better, the Athenians were uncommonly conservative and restrictive in their ways. Hence, it is believed that other territories would have fallen somewhere in between, with respect to their own treatment of women.

Besides the lack of non-Athenian primary sources, is the problem of the nature of them. The bulk of the available sources do not constitute direct testimonies because men wrote them. Hence, misogyny compounds the research concerns by tainting much of the available ancient literature. Such documentation include male poets from Homer and Hesiod, in Archaic Times; to the plays by Euripides; Plato’s and Aristotle’s essays; writings from physician Hippocrates in the fifth century; historians like Plutarch left a legacy of anecdotes about women; and the written testimony of orators (for the most part fourth century BCE). As a result, critical and careful examination must be considered when researching women’s studies during these specific eras and through these particular resources.

In addition to the types of sources mentioned, interpreting the illustrations of archeological artifacts, adds a wealth of value in the research of this subject matter. Women throughout Greek history have been depicted on sculptures, vases, coinage, tombstone epitaphs, jewelry, and personal items.

Despite the inadequate and limited amount of evidence available for research to researchers and scholars, these different elements offer an enticing peek into the unbelievable lives of a gender’s miserable subjugation.

The Rights of Classical Women

Although women in Athens were considered “ citizens” per se, they were not categorized as politai (which means citizens with “ political rights”), but rather as astai (“ members of the community”). As politai, only men had the right to attend assemblies, hold public office, take part in the military and litigate or sit in a jury, in a court of law. Even though women were not able to represent themselves, they could benefit from Athenian justice through indirect representation. A father, brother or husband (kyrios) would commonly stand for a woman’s interests in court. On the other hand, as an aste, women’s civic duties were limited to their involvement in community or religious events and festivals.

During the sixth century BCE, Solon institutionalized the distinction between “ respectable” women and prostitutes. He eliminated all forms of self-sale and sale of children into slavery, with the exception of the male guardian’s right to vend an unmarried female who had lost her virginity. As a result of these changes in legislation, Solon’s rules controlled the feasts, the mournings, the trousseaux, as well as the food and drink of citizen women. He also established state-owned whorehouses, staffed by slaves, which made this an enticing milieu for foreigners, craftsmen, merchants and prostitutes, alike. During Classical times, his laws continued to exercise a great deal of influence in the life of Athenian society.

Despite scholarly speculation, this legislation does not have to be, automatically, attributed to misogyny or Solon’s homosexuality. It can also be hypothesized that its purpose-which appears to be antifeminist, a priori-could have been designed with the intention of eliminating conflict between men and to reinforce the new democracy. Females were considered a source of friction amongst the male population and by keeping them out of sight and restricting their influence, Solon resolved this issue. Moreover, much of this legislation was aimed at reducing the clout of the Athenian aristocracy of the late Archaic period.

Marriage

The kyrios-male head of household-had a prominent role in the life of a woman and it was that of arranging her marriage. Generally, amongst the Athenians, it was the girl’s father who prepared this arrangement.

Girls did not have many opportunities to meet men, since “ respectable” young women were not permitted out frequently. In the event that a girl did go out (most likely to a community or religious festival), she did so accompanied by a chaperone. Therefore, not only was the marriage itself not her own decision, but more often than not, the girl wouldn’t even meet her future husband until the night before the wedding.

Marriage, during Classical times, was a legal agreement made amongst men (kyrios and husband-to-be) in front of a witness. Only after this formal betrothal-engue-was finalized, did the preparations for the wedding festivity (gamos) follow. The betrothal made the marriage legally binding. Before the wedding, it was traditional for the bride to offer her childhood toys, as well as her girdle, to Artemis who was believed to be the goddess protector of young virgin girls and pregnant women.

The average age for an Athenian girl to marry was approximately fourteen years old, while the average age for a man was about double. There is much scholarly conjecture about the reasons for this age difference. Some believe that this facilitated the man’s control over his wife. However, more conceivably, the ancient belief of young girl’s “ lustfulness”, coupled with the fact that men married at thirty and could be dead by forty, made this arrangement more advantageous to men since a widow could serve as a wife in several serial marriages. Also, a dying husband could also arrange the future marriage of his own wife.

There are no complete surviving documents describing an Ancient Greek wedding ceremony. Still, researchers have pieced together what this type of ceremony may have been like, based on depictions on pottery and literary fragments. It is thought that the wedding festivities began in the house of the bride’s father. When night fell, the bride, groom and his best friend would be taken to their new home in a chariot pulled by mules. The chariot would be followed by a torch-lit parade of friends and family. Once they arrived to the new home, the groom’s mother, who would guide the bride to the hearth of the house, would also greet the newlyweds. The couple was showered with nuts and dried fruits (symbols of prosperity and fertility), as hymns were sung. The procession ended when the groom led the bride to the bridal chamber. The following day, the bride and groom would present the family with gifts.

Spartan marriages were unlike any others in Greece. On the wedding day, the bride would chop off her hair and dress in men’s clothing. After dark, she would meet her husband in a secret place. Following the ceremony, the groom would go back to his barrack and only spend occasional moments with his wife, until he retired from military life at age thirty. Spartan couples were also closer in age (nineteen and twenty-five, on average), which may have facilitated the sense of equality that existed. Women could also be married to more than one man at a time, generally their brother in law (husband’s brother) and raise children from these unions, while the “ main” husband was away. It is thought that this degree of freedom may have begun as a government plan to breed lots of new citizens in order to make Sparta a powerful city-state.

Towards the end of the Archaic Age, the custom of gift giving from the groom to the bride’s father was replaced by the exchange of a dowry (proix) from the bride’s father to the groom. The proix was an indirect way for the father to provide for his young daughter, without having to allot the family’s land, which was set aside for the son/s of the family. The money in the dowry was to remain intact throughout her life. The husband could only borrow from the fund; however, he was to repay it at a high interest rate-eighteen percent. Although the proix was, for the most part, managed by the young girl’s husband, the father remained in control of her life to a certain extent, by exercising a degree of power within her marriage. For example, if the couple divorced, the husband was to return the entire dowry to the father. Hence, to a point, the proix, served as a “ guarantee of reasonable behavior”, according to Sue Blundell.

Dowries had other social purposes, since a father was not likely to raise more girls than dowries he could supply. Therefore, from time to time, a father might allow an infant daughter to die by “ exposing” her, if he could not afford such responsibility. Also, wealthier men of the same clan were known to assist poorer members, by providing the financial resources for a dowry. This also underscores the importance of the function of a close-knit extended family or clan.

Even though Athenian women did not own land, they were able to dispose of certain types of property, such as furniture, clothing and jewelry, which were commonly acquired through wedding gifts (anakalupteria). The value of this sort of property could be substantial, particularly amongst the upper class families.

Divorce

In Athens, a divorce was neither difficult to obtain, nor considered the social dishonor one may assume. Through a procedure called apopempsis or ekpempsis, the husband could order his wife removed from their common home and back to the guardianship of a father or brother. On the other hand, if the divorce were initiated by the woman (apoleipsis), a male guardian would have to petition the archon for it, on her behalf. Apheresis, was yet another type of divorce originated by the father of the bride for reasons of physical mistreatment or mishandling of the proix.

The most popular ground for divorce was adultery (moicheia). Nonetheless, the importance of birth legitimacy in this society made this a very severe transgression. Because women were regarded as the “ seduced” ones, their punishment was not as grave in contrast to that of men. A woman may have had to live the rest of her life in social humiliation for this type of infraction; however, a man could be punished with his life.

Women in Sparta

Beyond Athens and other similar states, there were communities that afforded women somewhat more favorable conditions. For example, it is well known that Spartan women participated in strong physical training, similar to that of men. They were also privileged to other rights, not widespread in most city-states.

Unlike Athenian women, the role of the Spartan woman within the home was not only limited to performing the chores but also to establishing the rules within that sphere. The reason for this was that since Archaic times, Spartan society was designed around a system that produced powerful soldiers. Therefore, males lived in military barracks between the ages of seven to thirty.

In stark contrast to the lives of classical Athenian women, Spartans were less confined to the household and could even own land. They were also more candid and self-assured towards the males in their family. As Plutarch points out in his Life of Agis,

“ Spartan men were always subject to their wives and allowed them to interfere in affairs of state more than they themselves did in private ones.”

There is not much known about inheritance laws in Sparta; however, women were able to inherit part of their father’s land. Her portion was, nevertheless, half of her brother, if she had one. On the other hand, if the father did not possess male heirs, she would receive the entire property, without having to marry a male relative, as necessary in Athenian law. Consequently, a great deal of property fell into women’s hands. In his Politics, Aristotle provides insight about this by claiming that “ women in Sparta have too much freedom and own two-fifths of the land.”

Women’s Clothing and Grooming

Greek women’s clothing was simple. There were two basic styles of tunics, usually made of linen or silk. Prostitutes wore saffron-dyed materials that were somewhat transparent in texture. Amongst reputable women, the most popular tunics were the chiton, which was made of two rectangles fixed firmly at the shoulder by pins or jeweled clips. The second, was the peplos, this was created from a single piece of cloth that wrapped around the body and was secured with a large pin on the shoulder. Both styles were belted at the waist with a thin strip of woven fabric. Around the house, a shorter and less confining version of these tunics was worn. Some women wore an undergarment that served as a bra that wrapped around the chest area, underneath their attire. To go outdoors, women would cover their clothes by wearing a cloak-like garment called himation. With respect to footgear, thong style sandals, as well as ankle-strapped styles, were popular. Some women were known to wear shoes with cork platforms that increased their height appearance.

Housewives, as well as prostitutes utilized cosmetics. A white complexion was highly cherished since it was proof that a woman was rich enough not to have to be exposed to the elements. In order to achieve this look, they used a powder made of white lead for the face and accentuated their cheeks with rouge made of mulberry juice. Some, also darkened their eyebrows and eyes with soot and wore fragrances. Women, as well as men employed olive oil to soften their skin. They eliminate dirt from their bodies by rubbing the oil and scraping it off with an instrument called strigil.

Even though their garments were simply made, their jewelry and hairdos could involve intricate work. All women, with the exception of slaves and women in mourning, wore their hair long. Generally, it was tied back in curls or braids and held in place by nets or ribbons. Fake curls appear to have been used at times, as well. The wealthy wore hair ornaments and headbands made of gold and silver.

Home Life

A thorough rationalization for the relegation of Greek women to the home appears in The Householder, written by Athenian soldier and philosopher Xenophon, in early fourth century BCE. In a particular section, a dialogue between a couple explains that it is “ nature’s way” for men to work outside and the women inside the home. After all, “ men were built to endure the harshness of weather and women were given the greater facility to love and nurture newborn babies”.

Fathers and husbands felt that contact with the outside world posed a threat to a women’s chastity or fidelity. Therefore, according to Sue Blundell, it was customary for men or slaves do the shopping in the marketplace. Thus, whenever women left the home they were always chaperoned by a family member or slave. However, women in Athens were permitted to participate in religious festivals, funerals and go to the theater or visit with friends.

Social class and economic necessity also determined a woman’s scale of public experience. For example, women of the middle and upper class did not have outside jobs, nor did they run errands. Amongst the poorer women, however, complete confinement was highly unlikely. Poorer houses did not have their own water wells in the courtyard, or a slave to go fill the urns with water from the community fountains.

Even within the household, women were kept segregated from unrelated men. It was fashionable amongst the higher class men to host after-dinner drinking parties called symposia. Although female entertainers and prostitutes were urged to attend, wives and daughters were prohibited from participating in this kind of affair. Throughout these types of events, women would typically retire to their quarters, known as gynaeceum or gynaikonitis, where they engaged in more appropriate activities, such as spinning, weaving, etc.

Women’s Education

Women’s activities also included paying bills and keeping track of household finances. This indicates that, at the very least, women were somewhat educated. Fathers and husbands, possibly, passed down their bookkeeping skills to their wives and daughters. However, manual skills such as cooking, spinning and weaving were passed down through the women.

Although paintings on artifacts show that some woman may have known how to read and write, Athenian women did not receive formal schooling simply because there was not a compelling need for it. Since the oral word was the main form of communication in Ancient Greece, illiteracy did not pose a significant hindrance. Nonetheless, this did reinforce the traditional belief that women were intellectually inferior to men.

Some men also felt that educated women constituted a threat to their own order. Consequently, it is believed that many of the men consciously encouraged their women’s state of ignorance. During Classical times, Athenian schoolboys were often taught a aphorism that said,

“ A man that teaches a woman to write should recognize that he is providing

poison to an asp.”

Contrary to this, in Sparta, women received physical training, as well as intellectual instruction as men did. On this matter, Plutarch adds that by “ making stronger bodies”, women would bear stronger and more “ successful pregnancies”. Xenophon also alludes to women’s involvement in wrestling and discus throwing, and Plato attests to their training in music. This generated a number of female poets, during Classical times, in the Peloponnesus region. Although most of their works have not survived, we learn of the existence of Cleitagora, Telesilla, Myrtis and Corinna, from the references of several philosophers. Because none of these women were Athenians, it is strongly supposed that Athens’s complete barring of women from education was uncommonly restrictive for a Greek state.

Pregnancy and Childbirth

The so-called scientific wisdom of Greeks doctors of these times was riddled with mistaken theories, particularly concerning women’s bodies. The school of medicine founded by Hypocrites, “ Father of Medicine”, in the fifth century BCE, documented many of these beliefs.

Greek scientists thought that a woman’s womb was somewhat of a “ wild” phenomenon that roamed up and down the body causing a series of symptoms. For example, if it traveled to the head, it was thought to produce tiredness and frothing of the mouth. If it stirred towards the chest area, it might cause the loss of voice. In the article On Virgins, it is indicated that when a girl begins menstruating, she is likely to have delusions, fevers and make “ rash” judgments. It was believed that this manifested itself because she had not yet experienced sexual intercourse, thus the mouth of her womb was not yet “ opened” and the blood backed up into the lungs and heart producing these unpleasant symptoms. In these cases, doctors would immediately recommend marriage and pregnancy, which was said to resume the “ normal” functions of her body.

However, becoming pregnant was thought to make her more susceptible to other kinds of “ ailments”, such as religious “ pollution” or impurity. In order to avoid being “ infected” she should refrain from contact with the dead or criminals. Pregnancy and childbirth were dangerous times for women and many, under the age of eighteen, died during, or immediately following, childbirth.

As a matter of course, women gave birth in the women’s quarter, assisted by the maia (midwife) and a few female family members or friends. The delivery took place in a seated position, on a birthing stool, or directly onto the helpers lap. One Hippocratic author depicts a particular childbirth, where four female helpers held the pregnant woman’s arms and legs and gave her ten hard shakes, “ in order to induce the birthing process”. Then, she would be placed on a bed and she would be agitated repeatedly, again. After the child was delivered, they would both be cleansed in a ritualistic bath, in order to remove any “ pollution”. The birth would be announced to the community by placing an olive stem (for a boy) or a piece of wool (for a girl), on the front door of the house. Shortly afterward, the mother would visit a shrine to Artemis and offer her fine clothing in gratitude.

The maternal mortality rate during childbirth was extremely high. It is believed that up to twenty in one hundred women would die while giving birth. This was mainly due to the high proportion of teenage pregnancy, their ignorance about hygiene, pour nourishment and lack of medical treatment.

As far as infant mortality is concerned, the rates were even higher. Mark Golden, who is noted for his studies of ancient Greek children, estimates that the numbers reached upwards of thirty five percent within the child’s first year of life-compared to one in a thousand, today in the United States. A Greek woman might have experienced several pregnancies throughout her life, but at least one or two of them would be lost. According to J. Lawrence Angels studies, the interval between pregnancies was about four years and his examination on skeletal remains indicates that women averaged 4. 3 pregnancies in a lifetime. In accordance with these calculations, the Athenian population would have grown with each generation, and indeed Aristotle stated that Pericles’ citizenship law was enacted because of the large number of citizens. There is no sure way to establish the demographic mix of Athens during Classical times (proportions of men to women, number of men dead on battlefields, etc). However, it can be said that homosexuality, anal intercourse, accessibility to prostitutes, and dislike of women, all served as methods to control the population.