

Women in Ancient Athens

What would you say if someone asked you to describe the roles of men and women in Canadian society? Men and women had very different roles in ancient Athens and generally lived very separate lives. These differences began from the moment of their birth. When a boy was born, his family attached an olive branch—a sign of victory—to the front door of the house. For a girl, they attached a piece of wool indicating her future as a homemaker. What do you think these symbols suggest about how boys and girls were valued in Greek society?

Women in Ancient Greece were considered second class citizens to men. Before getting married, girls were subject to their father and had to obey his commands. After getting married, wives were subject to their husbands. Women were looked down upon by men and were considered no smarter than children.

Women were expected to stay at home and manage the household. In the city-state of Athens, men sometimes wouldn't allow their wives to leave the home. They were basically prisoners in their own homes. Women managed the household slaves and even lived in a separate part of the house.

Women married to wealthy men were often confined to their homes. Their

jobs were to manage the household and to bear sons for the husband. They lived in a separate area of the home from the men and even ate their meals separate from the men. They had servants who helped with raising the children, doing household chores, and running errands. Most women, even wealthy women, helped to weave cloth for the family's clothing. Women and men had very different rights in Athenian society. Every woman had a male guardian, either her father, brother, or husband, who oversaw her life. Although she had the "right" to own clothing, jewellery, slaves, and even land, she was not allowed to sell or give away these things. Women did not take part in the Assembly.

Poor women often had more freedom than wealthy women because they couldn't afford as many slaves. Because they didn't have a lot of slaves, poor women needed to leave the house to run errands, fetch water, and shop. They sometime took jobs as servants for the wealthy or worked in the local shops.

In some Greek city-states, such as Athens, women had few legal rights. In Athens, women generally couldn't own property, couldn't vote, and weren't allowed to participate in the government. In other city-states,

women had a few more rights, but still had less rights than men.

Women usually had no say in who they married. They were "given" in marriage by their father to another man. Sometimes very young girls were wed to older men.

Slave women were the lowest class in Ancient Greece. They not only were slaves, but they were also women.

Life was different for the women of the city-state of Sparta. In Sparta, women were respected as the "mothers of warriors." Although they were not considered equal with men, they had more rights and freedom than the women of Athens. They were educated, played sports, allowed to walk around the city freely, and were also able to own property.

Interesting Facts About Women in Ancient Greece

- When a woman birthed a daughter she would look away from her husband in shame. Sometimes unwanted baby girls were thrown out with the trash.
- In Athens, women could only buy and sell things that were less than a certain value called a "medimnos" of grain. This allowed them to

buy small things at the market, but not participate in major business deals.

- The main public position a woman could have was as a priestess to one of the Greek goddesses.
- Women were not allowed to participate in the Olympic games.

Married women were strictly forbidden to attend and could be put to death if they were caught at the games.

Clothing

Ancient Greek men and women typically wore two pieces of clothing draped about the body: an undergarment (chiton or peplos) and a cloak (himation or chlamys). ... However, women usually wore their robes to their ankles while men generally wore theirs to their knees depending on the occasion and circumstance.

