

# Women of the Ancient World

## Greece: Democracy and Gender

### | Transcript



**Narrator:** The ancient Greeks changed the way people saw the world. Philosophy, science, theater, and democracy. They were the first to reject the rule of kings, proclaiming a government by the people for the people. Or should that be “most” people? Only Greek citizens had the right to vote and this excluded slaves, foreigners, and women. Despite being advanced in so many ways, the ancient Greeks gave few rights to their women.

Unlike men, women couldn’t vote at the Athenian Assembly, the groundbreaking body that allowed citizens to have a say in how they were governed. Athenian women couldn’t hold public office, own land, or inherit property in their own right. They lived under the protection of their father until a husband was picked for them, usually at the age of 14 or 15. Once married, women were expected to remain secluded at home, under the authority of their husbands. Women often had a separate living area in their own house: the *gynaikon*, a room on the upper floor. Here, women spent much of their time spinning, weaving, and sewing.

All but the poorest families had slaves, and it was the female slaves who did the cooking and cleaning. Slaves were treated relatively well in Athens and it was against the law to harm or misuse them. It was not uncommon for the woman of the house to grow close to her female slaves. That’s partly because the social sphere of an Athenian woman was small. She could visit female neighbors and exchange gossip at the well, she could attend religious ceremonies and festivals, and it was up to her to visit the tombs of family members, but not much else.

We have to keep in mind, however, that much of what we know about women in this time was written by men. There are tantalizing suggestions that women had more powerful roles in society than was otherwise acknowledged. For instance, strong female characters were often given starring roles in dramatic plays. In Aristophanes’s comedy *Assemblywomen*, the fictional Praxagora dresses as a man, complete with false beard, and infiltrates the Athenian Assembly. Other women join her, insisting men weren’t running the state properly. Once in, they started reforms to enforce sexual equality. Obviously this never happened, but there’s no doubt that some real women wielded power behind the scenes.

It was said that General Pericles’s famous speeches were written by his lover, Aspasia. Recognized as an intellectual and a teacher, Aspasia is also thought to have taught the well-known philosopher Socrates how to argue.

Outside of Athens, a Greek woman's life was different. The women of one famous city-state were every bit as tough and untamed as their men. This was Sparta.

Spartan girls enjoyed much more freedom than most other Greek girls. They received a public education and played sports with the boys. They ran, wrestled, threw javelins and discus, and took part in ball games. They married at a later age than other Greek women, at around 18. If a Spartan woman didn't like a suitor, she was free to refuse him, as long as she could physically fight him off. And many of them could.

Unlike Athenian women, Spartan women were able to divorce a man they disliked and remarry a man of their choice. Their greatest duty was to give birth to the next generation of warriors, for which they had to be physically strong. In fact, Spartan women who died while giving birth were given the same honors as soldiers who died in battle. Even maternal love in Sparta was tough. The ancient historian Plutarch recorded that mothers would admonish their sons when leaving for battle: "Come back with your shield, or on it." In other words, return victorious or die on the battlefield.

Some Spartan women were known for their brains as well as their toughness. Gorgo, the wife of King Leonidas, solved a critical puzzle. The king was sent a mysteriously blank wax writing tablet with no indication of what it meant. It was Gorgo who suspected the tablet contained a secret message. She urged that the wax be removed. Fortunately, people listened to her, because underneath the wax was a warning that the Persians were about to invade. This unusual respect for a woman's opinion is sometimes reflected in Greek mythology.

The ancient Greeks believed in many gods, the most powerful being the 12 Olympians. Of these, half were female: Hera, Demeter, Athena, Aphrodite, Hestia, and Artemis. Their domains included marriage, the home, love, and fertility. Goddesses generally had less power than the gods, but not always. Athena, the goddess of war, was held in higher regard than her male counterpart, Ares. While Athena was considered wise and just, Ares was often seen as the brutal god of reckless, unthinking wars. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, was a figure to fear, perhaps because she was unmarried and therefore untamed. One myth tells of the hunter Acteon, who saw the goddess bathing in the woods. Enraged by the invasion on her privacy, Artemis turned him into a stag and set his own hounds against him.

Women were generally given a bad rap in Greek mythology. It was Pandora who released all the evils into the world. Helen of Troy's beauty sparked a long and terrible war. Sirens were beautiful but deadly, and cunning witches were blamed for the troubles that men endured. It was chaste, mild women like Penelope, the faithful wife of Odysseus, who earned the Greeks' praise and admiration.

Perhaps this view, more than anything, shows us the true attitudes of most ancient Greeks towards women. Women who stayed home to care for their families were valued. Strong women who could think for themselves were not just frowned upon, they were feared.