

# WOMEN IN SPARTA

By 600 BCE Sparta had conquered her neighbors in the southern half of the Peloponnese. The vanquished people, called Helots, were required to do all of the agricultural work on land owned by the victors, making Sparta self-sufficient in food and ruler of a slave population seven or eight times as large. Not needing to import anything allowed Sparta to isolate herself from the culture of the rest of the world; fearing revolt by such a large number of slaves forced the country to become an armed camp: thus was determined the character of one of the oddest societies in the ancient world.

At the age of seven Spartan boys left home to be raised by the state in barracks. When they turned 30 they could set up their own households but they still ate dinner every night with the other men. One outsider on tasting such a dinner remarked, "Now I know why Spartan's don't fear death." The nation, not the family, was the center of focus for every man. The survival of the state, it was believed, depended on the ability of every Spartan to fight and defeat at least eight Helots. To that end, boys learned from an early age discipline, willingness to endure hardship, and the skills of a soldier. As part of their basic training, Spartan youths were sent into the countryside to seek out and kill those Helots who looked as if they might become leaders in their community.

While North American children are raised on Mother Goose rhymes and the Muppets, Spartan children were told tales of courage and fortitude. A favorite concerned the young boy who endured the repeated bites of a fox rather than admit he had the animal hidden under his jacket.

If boys left home for good at age 7 and husbands and fathers spent the greater part of their life in military training with other men, the impact of all this on the lives of women must have been enormous. While there is no proof one way or another, it seems likely that Spartan marriages were arranged by the parents with little thought for the preferences of the prospective bride or groom, but if Spartan women had no say in the choice of husband they certainly had more power and status in every other respect. They married at age eighteen, much later than other Greeks. Presumably this was to guarantee healthier and stronger babies rather than a large number, but it meant that most girls were emotionally stronger when they married. In any event other Greeks clearly believed that Spartan women had far too much power for the good of the state. Plutarch wrote that "the men of Sparta always obeyed their wives." Aristotle was even more critical of the influence women had in politics arguing that it was contributing to the downfall of the country. Women did not have a vote in the assembly but seem to have had a lot of influence behind the scene.

Women could own property---and did in fact own more than a third of the land in Sparta---and they could dispose of it as they wished. Daughters inherited along with sons. Unfortunately, when we get down to the particulars there are some gaps in our knowledge. Attempts were made to get rid of the practice of needing a dowry to get married. It is possible that endeavors by fathers to get around the law have led to considerable confusion in our eyes as to what was a gift and what was a dowry. Daughters may have inherited half of what a son inherited; it is also possible that if you combine dowry with inheritance they ended up with a full share of the estate.

Spartan women had a reputation for boldness and licentiousness that other Greeks found unseemly. Women's tunics were worn in such a way as to give them a little more freedom of movement and the opportunity to reveal a little leg and thigh if they so desired. Spartan girls competed in athletics at the same time as the boys and may have done so in the nude before a mixed audience. Plutarch mentions nude rituals witnessed by young men. The end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries BCE saw a decline in the number of men relative to women. Several men might share a wife and regard the

children as their own. The woman would clearly be the dominant member of any such family. An unmarried man might approach a friend and ask if he could “borrow” his wife to produce a child for him. If the husband had all of the children he wanted and approved of the suitor he might agree. It is highly unlikely that the mature wife and mother lacked a strong voice in the arrangements, considering the power and status of adult women in everything else. Since marriage existed strictly for the procreation of children and not as an answer to emotional or social needs the arrangement would not have had the same meaning to them as it might to us.

Some have suggested the practice began as a way of limiting the breakup of family estates at death--a serious problem in those societies where daughters inherit as well as sons. Others regard it as an appropriate response to a disproportionate number of men and women in a society where family life was not all that important anyway.

The picture that emerges is a contradictory one. Spartan and Athenian women lived much of their lives far removed from the men of their societies. Athenian men spent time away discussing politics and philosophy, but when they went home they expected obedience from their wives and no Athenian citizen would ever admit to taking advice from a woman. Spartan men were absent even more; while they were the only ones who held official office everyone acknowledged the influence women had in decision making. Spartan women may have gained freedom from male domination, but they were even less likely to get any emotional support from their marriages. The men of Athens had to be the boss in public, but there was no such social requirement in the home behind closed doors. The overt power of the husband was replaced in Sparta by an unspoken but very real control by the state. Spartan women remained breeding machines whose purpose was to produce the male soldiers the state needed to defend itself against revolt by the Helots. Mother love was replaced by a mother’s pride in her son’s bravery in battle and disgust with any sign of cowardice. “Come home with your shield or upon it” was reputed to be the advice one woman gave her son as he went off to war. She may well have been speaking on behalf of all Spartan women.

### **WHY SPARTAN WOMEN WERE MORE DOMINANT IN SOCIETY THAN THEIR ATHENIAN SISTERS**

1. Girls were given a good education in both the arts and athletics.
2. Women were encouraged to develop their intellect.
3. Women owned more than a third of the land.
4. There was less difference in age between husbands and wives, and girls in Sparta married at a later age than their sisters in Athens.
5. Husbands spent most of their time with other men in the military barracks; since the men were rarely home, the women were free to take charge of almost everything outside of the army.
6. Mothers reared their sons until age 7 and then society took over. Fathers played little or no role in child care.