FROM ANCIENT TO MODERN:
Greek Women’s Struggle for Equality

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TAKE MY HAND, CLIMB WITH ME, WE CAN GO UP TOGETHER,
IT’S SIMPLE, I AM TELLING YOU, IT’S SO SIMPLE . . .

“The River,” Cultural Team of the Movement for Greek Women’s Liberation

Since it joined the European Union, Greece has been pushed toward modernization at a faster speed. A country still very tied to the legacy of its ancient civilization, Greece has been struggling to find balance between modernity and the country’s rich cultural heritage. Even as the country advances technologically, the power of tradition continues to exert tremendous influence. Greek women, in particular, are caught in this paradox. It is a quiet struggle, but a fascinating one worthy of greater study. Unfortunately, in American schools, teachers who examine Europe often limit their study to the powerful countries of the continent like Britain, France, Germany, or Italy. Although some aspects of ancient Greece are covered in the social studies curriculum, American students rarely study the vibrant contemporary Greek society.

One significant aspect of modernization has been the change in women’s status—the result of a blend of tradition and innovation, according to some scholars. After providing a brief overview of Greek women’s historical struggles for autonomy, this article will offer suggestions for teaching about contemporary Greek women.

Women in Ancient Greece

Of all creatures who live and have intelligence, we women are the most miserable. [...] People say that we women lead a life without danger inside our homes, while men fight in war; but they are wrong. I would rather serve three times in battle than give birth once.

Medea’s complaint, Athens, Greece, 431 BC (Euripides, Medea 230-51, G)

As Medea’s distressed words indicate, the glorious democratic freedom of the classical Greek polis was not applied to women. On the contrary, in everyday life, women of ancient Greece were under the authority of men—either fathers or husbands. In fact, Greek law required the bride’s family to pay a dowry to the groom when getting married. In a period when the nuclear family and the oikos (household) served as the foundation of proper citizenship, a woman’s neglect of domestic duties could lead to severe legal and social consequences. A man’s parallel household violation, such as the sexual exploitation of young slaves or hetairai, was not similarly punished.

Nonetheless, not all women were absorbed with their domestic tasks; some dared to undertake employment outside the home. Women also played an important role in religious festivals. The work of classical Greek writers demonstrates that Greek women’s desire for self-determination is not simply a modern phenomenon. Plato’s Symposium, for example, tells the story of Diotima, a woman who challenged Athenian men with her bold opinions. Kallipateira, a name quite familiar to Greek schoolchildren, was the first woman to participate—albeit secretly—in the ancient Olympic games.

Still, despite some advances in women’s political and social rights during the Hellenistic and Roman eras that followed the classical Greek era, the household remained the foundation of social cohesion. Throughout the centuries leading up to the modern era, many cultural patterns affecting gender relations proved remarkably resilient in the face of new economic and political conditions. As scholar Marilyn Arthur puts it, although Greek gods “ceased to hate men,” unfortunately, men did not cease “to hate women.”

The Greek Women’s Rights Movement

The emergence of a women’s movement in Greece traces its origins to the late nineteenth century, although this effort involved only a small proportion of middle and upper class urban women. Even as they dared to demand better treatment, these pioneering women did not totally question their traditional female role, fearing that upsetting the institution of family would be seen as threatening society as a whole.

At that time, Greek women fought mainly for their right to education; in fact, the first people to speak out in support of more education for women were teachers. In the nineteenth century, women entered Greek universities for the first time, and female writers began to get published in respected publications like Artemis (1866), Thaleia (1867), and Eurydice (1870-73). Emerging Greek women writers—such as Calliope Kehagia, Sophia Laskaridou, Sebasti Callisperi, Sappho Leontias, and Penelope Lazaridou—reflected the concerns of women of their time. The 1887 publication of The Newspaper of the Ladies (He Ephemeris ton Kirion), by leading women’s rights activist Calliope Parren, represented a pinnacle of sorts. But by 1936, the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas, followed by World War II and a series of civil conflicts, stifled this progressive movement.
For Greece, economic, political, and social development marked the decades following the second world war. Most significantly, the evolution taking place in technology and infrastructure, which fueled a massive migration to urban centers, and the increased entrance of women into the educational and labor forces helped bring about substantial changes in the position of women. In Greece, women won the right to vote in 1952, but the women’s rights movement, as a systematic social operation, did not evolve until the late twentieth century.

The 1980s can reasonably be characterized as a turning point for women in Greece. The fall of the military dictatorship in 1974, the rise of the Greek Socialist Movement, and the contributions made by the new First Lady, the American feminist Margaret Papandreou, paved the way for a number of institutional and legislative shifts. A new generation of women’s organizations emerged, this time with real access to centers of political power and decision-making. Throngs of tourists and visitors brought foreign customs and new notions of gender equality that challenged traditional Greek ideas of male/female relationships and family living.

In the late twentieth century, as a member of the European Union (EU), Greece was bound to making its laws compatible with EU standards concerning the status of all citizens. In particular, Greece was required to ratify Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome and the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This automatically initiated a series of legislative shifts and innovations, aimed at advancing the status of women in many aspects of life, such as the educational, economic, and political arenas, with particular focus on human rights and violence against women.

A recent United Nations report about Greek women notes that the family law, revised in 1983 so that Greece would be compatible with the EU, brought significant changes, including eliminating the institutionalization of husband as head of household, allowing women to maintain their family surname, eliminating the wedding dowry requirement, establishing divorce by common consent, and allowing mutual say in selecting the surname of offspring. In the field of employment, the revised legislation declared equality between the sexes in all employment relations, particularly in working conditions, pay, and promotion opportunities. In the matter of social insurance, maternity rights and day-care facilities were provided for female employees. And, in 1984, rape and sexual harassment were declared criminal offenses. In 1988, a nine-member Council for Gender Equality, which had been established in 1982, was upgraded to the status of General Secretariat of Equality, under the Ministry of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralization.

Over the past two decades, the legislative system of Greece, especially regarding gender equality, has become one of the most progressive in Europe. The question is, has legislation translated into real equality for Greek women?

Economic and Educational Status of Women

According to a 2001 UNICEF report, Greek women’s overall social, political, and economic position is still rather disappointing. Even though Greek women represent 52 percent of the population, they hold only 34.7 percent of jobs. Of these, only 13.2 percent are at higher administrative levels. And women represent 62 percent of the unemployed. The University of Athens has also reported that Greek homemakers, along with retired persons, have the lowest standard of living of any group in the country.

In rural families, these problems are particularly acute. Women face great difficulties when they attempt to enter the labor market as something other than farm workers. And the women who experience the most extreme form of social difficulty are migrant, Gypsy, and Turkish minority women. Cultural hurdles, language barriers, and extreme poverty force these women into “black labor”—a term used to indicate work without insurance stamps, or with little or no salary—or victimization through sexual exploitation and harassment.

Approaching these critical issues with young students can be a complex and challenging task. In order to stimulate student interest in Greek women’s lives today, teachers might consider using simulations, such as Model UN programs, in which students become actively involved in investigating various issues common to all European countries. Students could take on the roles of Greek political officials, EU representatives, women’s rights advocates, human rights advocates, or investigative journalists who explore various aspects of the questions under examination, marshalling statistical, philosophical, historical, and sociological arguments. Using their acquired knowledge, students could construct their own proposals for legislation or social action to improve Greek women’s participation in education, labor, and politics. Technology can be useful in this process, especially when teachers organize online resources for students in the form of an inquiry lesson called a “webquest” (see Bernie Dodge’s model at webquest.sdsu.edu).

Among the online sources available to teachers are UN press releases (www.un.org), reports from the European Network for Women (www.ihf-hr.org/reports/royaumont/WHR-Greece.pdf), Greek governmental research centers on gender equality (www.kethi.gr/english/Default.htm), and selections from the Greek press, available online in Greece’s international English language newspaper, Kathimerini (www.ekathimerini.com). Using the Internet, students could also access photographs of Greek women and see films presenting the diverse conditions of Greek women around the country.

Sites associated with the Thessalonica Film Festival (www.filmfestival...
Supplementary Readings for
Ancient and Contemporary Greek Women's History

Useful Information
The Embassy of Greece in Washington, D.C. provides useful information about Greek history and geography, foreign policy, business, tourism, and cultural news, links to the Greek press, and the Greek consular authorities in U.S. cities.

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2221 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20008
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Fax (202) 939-1324
www.greekembassy.org
Office Hours: Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.

Political and Social Rights
The UN Report on Human Development ranks Greece sixty-sixth of all countries in terms of women's representation in government. In 2000, women constituted only 10.3 percent of the representatives in the Greek Parliament, and held only 12 percent of appointed national government positions. Those women typically served in the areas of health and social welfare, education, culture, and employment—fields in which women have had the longest tradition. No Greek woman has ever been elected prime minister. Recently, however, Dora Bakogiann became the first woman elected mayor of Athens. Currently, the only female party leader in Greece is Aleka Papariga, a member of the Communist Party. One excellent source of information on women and politics is the Greek section of the European Database for Women (www.db-decision.de/CoRe/Greece.htm), Speeches made by a Greek leader, European Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou, about gender issues are also available at europa.eu.int/comm/commissioners/diamantopoulou/speeches_en.html.

Additionally, Greek American women who live in the United States have founded many women's rights organizations, which have played leading roles in philanthropic, educational, or cultural activities. Many of these organizations have web pages that offer a clear view of the contemporary demands of Greek and Greek American women. Other organizations that may interest students are the Greek-Turkish women's organizations devoted to a peaceful resolution of the longstanding conflict between these two countries (such as WIN Peace, the Women's Initiative for Peace: www.geocities.com/win_peace/win4.html).

A persistent problem for Greek women has been violence related to sexism. This kind of abuse mainly occurs within the family or the workplace. The movie Stella, perhaps one of the Greek movies best known to American viewers, deals with this problem. The movie, starring actress Melina Mercouri, who later became minister of culture in Greece, was made forty years ago, but, unfortunately, the issue of gender violence still remains a problem today. Immigrant women, especially those who have emigrated from poverty-stricken former Eastern bloc nations, are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence, including forced prostitution.

Although there is very little Greek literature (especially in English translation) dealing with such sensitive issues, the UN's "CyberSchoolBus" (online at www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/) is a remarkable source of data. With films and documentaries presenting stories that take viewers beyond Europeanized Athens, students can explore whether Greek traditional values continue to restrict women's autonomy. In particular, I suggest the documentary film 24 Hours in the Village, dealing with life in the Arcadian village of Vlahokaria. For more information, visit www.vermontinc.com/greekfilms.html. Teachers can also acquire helpful material by searching the archives and library of the Greek Permanent Mission to the United Nations (www.undp.org/missions/greece). Women associated with Greek American organizations could also be invited to classrooms for interviews and discussion. These representatives can also discuss issues related more generally to immigrant life in a new country.

Conclusion
The examination of the status of women in Greek society shows that, while legal and institutional change is important, it takes much more to bring about real societal change. In Greece, change may be slow, but gender equality remains a goal. The impact of the European Union will undoubtedly accelerate the transformation of gender relations in the Greek society and will hopefully advance Greek women's aspirations for greater autonomy. By presenting accurate and multifaceted understandings of Greek life, past and present, American educators can contribute to increased cross-cultural understanding and greater knowledge of the history, contributions, and
experiences of Greek women.

Notes


12. Mary Castleberg-Kourma, “The Impact of Tourism on Greek Women,” in Eftychia Leontidou, ed., *He Hellada ton Gynaikon (The Greece of Women)* (Athens, Greece: Enallaktikes Ekdoseis, 1992), 135-147. The article describes very vividly the initial “shock” that many rural women went through, as well as their husbands, with the arrival of the first women tourists to their villages. The confessions are very humorous and sincere.


19. Roubanis et al., 33-34.

