

"What was the Effect of Poverty on the Life of Women in Classical Athens?"

For women in Classical Athens, life was very different depending on the wealth and status of the family group in question. They could not be secluded inside the Household if they were poor due to a need to work and take care of jobs that for richer families would be a slave's job¹. They would not be seen in high regard².

In classical Athens, poverty was not measured by the amount of disposable income that a family may have, and instead was measured by the amount of leisure time³. This, therefore means that the number of family groups that were classified as 'poor' was large and resultantly, the majority of women at the time were living in poverty. A slave was expensive and as a result, the poorest of family groups would not be able to afford one, and for those that could, it would be a massive investment⁴. Therefore, for women in poverty, they would not have the help of a slave for household chores, and would have to do much more hand-on work than their elite equivalents. Poor women would have to do the unrespectable jobs that would usually be relegated to a slave, such as fetching water for the household and shopping⁵. Their lesser status would clearly be shown through these actions, with their poverty on display for all to see, with it even being more fully encapsulated within their marriages. Often marrying at a younger age with a much less respectable dowry, poorer women would very rarely be able to reach the societal standards that Classical Athens strived for at the time⁶.

The extra work that poor women would have to face did not remain at just household chores either. Some poorer wives were required to help their oikos'⁷ finances by performing jobs which yielded financial gain, such as holding a stall at a market or helping out in the family farm⁸. This prevented them from remaining in their "Proper Place" of the respectable Athenian woman- the home⁹. This is because where a richer woman would be responsible for overseeing the slaves in their duties, the poor woman would be responsible for those duties herself¹⁰. This was not an ideal situation for an Athenian woman in terms of status due to the ideas of seclusion¹¹. This seclusion of women from the sight of the opposite sex was a standard that only the elite could achieve through their more managerial roles¹². The poor woman who had to work would not be able to achieve this and thusly, would not be seen as respectable due to free women being expected to strive for such an ideal- they even wore conservative clothing in an attempt to achieve this¹³.

In conclusion, due to the need to work and be outside of the Household for elongated periods of time, poverty and the varying levels of wealth at the time could have a huge impact on the lives of Athenian women and would contribute immensely to their lower social status¹⁴.

¹ Taylor, 2017

² Pope, 1976, p.99

³ Austin and Vidal-Naquet, 1977, p.16

⁴ Webster, 1973, p.39

⁵ Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.167

⁶ Pope, 1976, p.89

⁷ Jameson, 2012

⁸ Pritchard, 2005, p. 182, Pope, 1976, p.76

⁹ Pope, 1976, p.76; Aristot. Pol. 3,4,1277b

¹⁰ Pritchard, 2014, p.51

¹¹ Pomeroy, 1995, p.92

¹² Pomeroy, 1995, p.90

¹³ Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.163; Pomeroy, 1995, p.93

¹⁴ Pope, 1976, p.76

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