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PHILOSOPHY OF GENDER INEQUALITY: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT SOCIETIES

This article explores the philosophical problem of gender inequality in ancient societies, focusing on how social, political, economic, and cultural conditions influenced the status of women. The works of ancient philosophers and historians, particularly Aristotle, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Titus Livius, are examined to reveal how patriarchal structures shaped perceptions of gender roles and entrenched them in social norms and laws. Emphasis is placed on the philosophical analysis of the concepts of natural hierarchy and gender roles presented in Aristotle's works and their influence on legitimizing gender inequality. The gap between the officially subordinate status of women and their actual contributions to philosophy, literature, and medicine is explored, indicating the complexity and multifaceted nature of their role in ancient societies. Alternative approaches to gender roles in different regions are analyzed, particularly in Sparta and Rome, where women had more freedoms and legal rights. This allows for a rethinking of traditional philosophical views on the role of women and underscores the necessity for a deeper understanding of gender relations in historical and philosophical contexts. Studying gender inequality in ancient societies enables a better understanding of the roots of modern gender stereotypes and discrimination. Understanding the historical origins of these issues contributes to the formation of a more just and equitable society today.

Keywords: philosophy, gender inequality, ancient societies, role of women, patriarchy, gender roles, social norms, historical philosophy, gender history.

Юрій Григорак

ФІЛОСОФІЯ ГЕНДЕРНОЇ НЕРІВНОСТІ: РОЛЬ ЖІНОК В АНТИЧНИХ СУСПІЛЬСТВАХ

У статті досліджується філософська проблема гендерної нерівності в античних суспільствах, акцентуючи увагу на тому, як соціальні, політичні, економічні та культурні умови впливали на статус жінок. Розглядаються твори античних філософів і істориків, зокрема Арістотеля, Ксенофонта, Плутарха та Тіта Лівія, з метою виявити, як патріархальні структури формували уявлення про гендерні ролі та закріплювали їх у суспільних нормах і законах. Акцент зроблено на філософському аналізі концепцій природної ієрархії та гендерних ролей, представлених у працях Арістотеля, та їх впливі на легітимацію гендерної нерівності. Досліджується розрив між офіційно підпорядкованим статусом жінок і їхнім реальним внеском у філософію, літературу та медицину, що свідчить про складність та багатогранність їхньої ролі в античних суспільствах. Аналізуються альтернативні підходи до гендерних ролей у різних регіонах, зокрема в Спарті та Римі, де жінки мали більше свобод та юридичних прав. Це дозволяє переосмислити традиційні філософські погляди на роль жінок і підкреслює необхідність глибокого розуміння гендерних відносин у історичному та філософському контекстах. Дослідження гендерної нерівності в античних суспільствах дозволяє краще зрозуміти корені сучасних гендерних стереотипів та дискримінації. Розуміння історичних витоків цих проблем сприяє формуванню більш справедливого та рівноправного суспільства сьогодні.

Ключові слова: філософія, гендерна нерівність, античні суспільства, роль жінок, патріархат, гендерні ролі, соціальні норми, історична філософія, гендерна історія.

Studying the role of women in ancient societies is a complex and multifaceted task that requires a deep analysis of social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. In historical sources such as the works of Aristotle, Herodotus, Plutarch, and others, the role of women is often reduced to a secondary or subordinate position, reflecting the patriarchal values of those societies. This creates a number of problematic issues that demand detailed examination. The problem lies in the fact that, although ancient sources often describe women as deprived of political rights and limited in their capabilities, there is simultaneous evidence of their significant contributions to various spheres of life, such as philosophy, literature, and medicine. This disparity between the official status of women and their actual participation in social life creates a need to rethink traditional notions about the role of women in antiquity.

Thus, the problem involves not only studying how patriarchal structures limited women but also understanding how women could actively interact with these structures, using available opportunities for

self-realization and societal influence. This issue is central in the context of modern gender history research, which aims to deconstruct traditional narratives and discover new approaches to understanding the role of women in ancient societies.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications: Among contemporary authors dedicated to the role of women in ancient societies, several key publications can be noted:

“Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity” – This publication, released under the auspices of Cambridge University, was created by a team of authors that includes leading researchers in the gender history of antiquity.

“Gender, Institutional Inequality, and Institutional Diversity in Archaeology” – This research was prepared by a large team of authors, including prominent scholars like Alpoim Guedes, Gonzalez, Rivera-Collazo, Fluellen, and others who focus on issues of gender inequality in archaeology and its reflection in scientific publications.

These works represent modern approaches to studying gender issues in the context of both historical and academic realities.

Goal: To conduct an in-depth analysis of the role of women in ancient societies through the lens of social, political, economic, and cultural conditions that influenced their status. The research aims to identify and comprehend the mechanisms by which women could overcome established limitations and actively participate in social life, as well as to study regional and cultural differences in the status of women among various ancient communities such as Greece, Rome, and Sparta. This will allow for a better understanding of the complexity and multifaceted nature of women’s roles in these societies and will contribute to adjusting modern perceptions of gender relations in historical and philosophical contexts.

The role of women in ancient societies was largely determined by cultural, social, political, and economic conditions. Although women were limited in their rights and opportunities, their contributions to various spheres of life—such as philosophy, poetry, and medicine—were extremely important.

Aristotle examines social structures through the lens of nature and the natural order, asserting that any community (ancient Greek: *κοινωνία*) exists for the sake of some good (*ἀγαθόν*) and is formed precisely to achieve it. The highest form of such a community, according to Aristotle, is the city-state (*πόλις*), which encompasses all other social institutions and structures. This concept serves as the basis for his further reflections on the nature of interactions between different social groups, especially between men and women, rulers and the ruled [1, 1252a1–7].

“ἀνάγκη δὴ πρῶτον συνδυάζεσθαι τοὺς ἄνευ ἀλλήλων μὴ δυναμένους εἶναι”

“It is necessary first of all to unite those who cannot exist without each other.”

This thought expresses a fundamental principle that union or alliance is a necessary condition for entities that cannot exist independently of one another. This can be seen as a statement about the nature of social and ontological interdependence, emphasizing that the existence of individual entities or elements becomes possible only within their relationships and interactions. Among such categories, Aristotle includes man and woman (*θῆλυ μὲν καὶ ἄρρεν*), whose connection is conditioned by procreation, as well as ruler and ruled (*ἄρχον δὲ φύσει καὶ ἀρχόμενον*), whose interaction is necessary for maintaining social order. It is important to note that Aristotle considers these connections as natural rather than the result of conscious choice, highlighting their inevitability and indispensability within the framework of human society [1, 1252a26–31].

Aristotle introduces the concept of natural hierarchy, asserting that by nature (*φύσει*), people are divided into those capable of governing thanks to foresight and those inclined toward physical labor and subordination (*τὸ δυνάμενον τῷ σώματι πονεῖν ἀρχόμενον καὶ φύσει δοῦλον*). This distinction, according to Aristotle, justifies the natural inequality between genders and social roles, substantiating the exclusion of women and slaves from active participation in political life. Aristotle considers these differences not accidental but necessary and natural [1, 1252a34–1252b5].

From the standpoint of gender equality, such a position by Aristotle is problematic. It reinforces social and gender roles as natural, effectively legitimizing discrimination and the exclusion of certain groups, particularly women, from public and political spheres. Aristotle does not merely describe the existing state of affairs but also provides it with moral and natural justification, thereby legitimizing structural inequality.

In ancient Greece, such views on gender and social roles were generally accepted, and Aristotle’s philosophy reflected this social reality.

Aristotle also asserts that man is by nature a political animal (*πολιτικὸν ζῷον*). The city-state (*πόλις*) precedes the individual because it is the ultimate goal of the development of human communities. Thus,

those who are unable to live in a community or do not need it may be either a beast or a god (θηρίον ἢ θεός), for man, by nature, strives for life in society. This underscores that social and political life is inseparable from human nature, and justice is a central element of the political community [1, 1253a18–39]. Within his political philosophy, he creates a justification for social and political inequality based on natural hierarchy. His arguments confirm the interdependence of different social roles but also establish strict boundaries, defining who by nature is inclined to governance and who to subordination.

Aristotle's teachings had a great influence on the development of political theories; however, other ancient thinkers also contributed to the understanding of politics and social organization. For example, Xenophon, known for his military and political treatises, begins with reflections on how Sparta, one of the smallest Greek city-states in terms of population, became one of the most powerful and famous in Greece. He marvels at this and explains that after studying the customs of the Spartans, his surprise disappeared. Xenophon especially praises Lycurgus, the creator of laws that led Sparta to prosperity. Lycurgus did not follow the example of other city-states but instead took the opposite path and made his country prosperous (εὐδαιμονία) [2, Const. Lac., 1.1–1.3].

Laws concerning education (παιδεία) and the preparation of women for childbirth were also established. Unlike other Greek city-states, where future mothers received minimal nutrition and lived under strict limitations, Lycurgus considered it important to train women no less than men. He introduced for women competitions in running (δρόμος) and strength (ισχύς), believing that healthy parents would produce stronger offspring (ἔκγονα) [2, 1.4].

Lycurgus's approach can be seen as progressive for his time. While in other Greek city-states women were largely excluded from public life and limited in development opportunities, in Sparta they were given the chance for physical training on par with men. This can be perceived as recognition of the importance of women's roles in society, although the main goal of such measures remained instrumental—ensuring the birth of strong warriors. However, despite such an apparently progressive step, Lycurgus's approach still does not go beyond the traditional view of gender roles, where women are considered primarily through the lens of their biological function as mothers. The physical training of women in Sparta was not aimed at their self-expression or empowerment but at achieving a socially defined goal—the birth of strong offspring.

Lycurgus also established laws concerning marital relations. He believed that excessive closeness (συνόντας) between husband and wife at the beginning of marriage could weaken the health of children, so he introduced restrictions on the frequency of their meetings. He also decreed those marriages (γάμοι) should be contracted during the period of maximum physical maturity to ensure the birth of stronger (ἔρρωμενέστερα) and healthier children [2, 1.5–1.6].

In his description of Lycurgus's laws, Xenophon provides an interesting view of Spartan marriage customs, which significantly differed from the traditions of other city-states. According to these laws, if an old man married a young woman, Lycurgus allowed her to have children by a younger and healthier man, if she respected him (ἀγάσθε). Similarly, if a man did not want to live with his wife but desired to have children, he could persuade another man to allow his wife to bear him children, provided she was healthy and noble. Philosophically, this approach can be seen as a radical subordination of individual rights and feelings to the collective good. Lycurgus created a system where social norms and laws directed the personal lives of citizens toward collective benefit, reflecting the Spartan notion of society as an organism in which all parts must act together to achieve a common goal [2, 1.7].

Similar themes of subordinating individual rights to the collective good arise in Roman history, though in a different context. In Book 34 of the History of Rome, Titus Livius describes debates around the Oppian Law, enacted during the Punic Wars. This law limited luxury among Roman women, prohibiting them from owning more than half an ounce of gold, wearing brightly colored clothing, and riding in carriages within the city or within one mile of it, except for religious ceremonies. The law was part of broader efforts to control expenditures and demonstrate solidarity during difficult times for the state. The debates around the Oppian Law reflect the conflict between individual desires and collective needs that often arises in societies facing threats or crises. As in Sparta, where Lycurgus's laws directed the private lives of citizens for the common good, the Roman legislator used restrictions as a means of ensuring the stability and unity of the state. During the discussion of repealing this law, two sides clashed: one side supported the repeal, arguing that with Rome's prosperity and the growing well-being of its citizens, women should be allowed to regain their former privileges. On the other hand, conservatives, including Marcus Porcius Cato, strongly opposed the repeal, seeing in it a threat to traditional Roman values and social order [3, 34.1, 7].

From the perspective of gender equality, this episode is indicative of how gender roles and women's rights in Roman society were subjects of ongoing struggle and revision. Although Roman women had limited political rights, their fight for the repeal of the Oppian Law demonstrates that they were not passive participants in social life. On the contrary, women actively used the resources and opportunities available to them to influence social processes and defend their economic and social privileges. The debates around the Oppian Law also highlight deep structural contradictions in Roman society, where conservative forces sought to preserve the traditional social order that limited women's rights. However, even in this context, Roman women, through their participation in the debates, demonstrated the ability to influence public discussions and to question the existing order.

In comparing the status of women in Greece and Rome, it is important to understand that both societies had their unique systems that defined the roles and rights of women, although in both cultures women remained in secondary positions.

Status of Women in Greece: In classical Athens, women were largely isolated from public life. Their primary role was to manage the household, and they were under strict control of their husbands or fathers. In the article "Seclusion, Separation, and the Status of Women in Classical Athens," David Cohen emphasizes that Athenian women lived under conditions of social isolation, without the right to participate in political life. They were considered as "guardians of the home," whose main duty was to maintain the household and raise children [4, p. 6]. However, this isolation did not mean an absolute lack of influence; women could influence family decisions and had certain inheritance rights.

Status of Women in Rome: In Rome, women had more legal rights. They could own property, engage in business, and even initiate legal proceedings. However, as in Greece, their political participation was strictly limited. Roman women could influence political decisions through their husbands or sons, but they themselves could not hold official positions. In comparison with Athens, Roman women enjoyed a wider range of economic rights, which gave them certain advantages, although their social status remained subordinate. Cohen notes that even in conditions where women could influence public life, their freedoms and opportunities were limited by cultural and social norms that dictated their behavior and status [4, p. 12]. Thus, although women in Greece and Rome faced different forms of restriction, both societies demonstrated general tendencies to exclude women from political life, leaving them only limited opportunities for economic and social influence.

Despite the restrictions, some women managed to achieve success in science and philosophy. Among them were famous poetesses, philosophers, and physicians who left a significant mark in history. Plutarch, in his work *Mulierum Virtutes* (On the Virtues of Women), raises important questions about women's virtues and their role in philosophy and science. He argues that the virtues of men and women are essentially the same and should not differ by gender. Plutarch cites examples of women such as Sappho and the Sibyls, who demonstrated their abilities in poetry and prophecy, not yielding to men. He also emphasizes that differences in virtues may be related to different conditions of upbringing and social norms, but the virtues themselves have no gender differences.

“τί δέ; ἐὰν ποιητικὴν πάλιν ἢ μαντικὴν ἀποφαίνοντες οὐχ ἑτέραν μὲν ἀνδρῶν ἑτέραν δὲ γυναικῶν οὔσαν, ἀλλὰ τὴν αὐτὴν, τὰ Σαπφοῦς μέλη τοῖς Ἀνακρέοντος ἢ τὰ Σιβύλλης λόγια τοῖς Βάκιδος ἀντιπαραβάλλωμεν.” [8, 0.6].

“What then? If we assert that poetic or prophetic art is not different for men and women, but is the same, and if we compare the songs of Sappho with those of Anacreon, or the oracles of the Sibyl with those of Bacis, does anyone have the right to justly dispute this, since they bring joy and pleasure to the listener?”

Plutarch uses several important terms in the context of equality and virtue:

1. **ἀρετή (arete)** – virtue, dignity, moral excellence. Plutarch believes that these moral qualities are the same for men and women.

2. **δόξα (doxa)** – glory, reputation. He quotes Gorgias, who asserts that the glory of a woman, and not her appearance, should be known to many [8, 243b].

Plutarch also criticizes Thucydides' opinion that the best woman is the one about whom the least is spoken, emphasizing the importance of public recognition of women's virtues [9, 45]. Thus, we see that Plutarch raises the issue of the perception of women's virtues and their significance in society, asserting that they should not be hidden but, on the contrary, be known and respected.

In Athens, Sparta, and Rome, clothing not only served aesthetic functions but was also an important symbol of social status and gender roles. In each of these cultures, clothing played a key role in reflecting and

reinforcing the patriarchal norms and power structures that prevailed in society. Clothing in these societies not only reflected gender roles but also served as an instrument of social differentiation, emphasizing the status and role of each individual in the social hierarchy.

In Athens, where social and political rights of women were significantly limited, clothing became a reflection of ideals of modesty and morality imposed by the patriarchal society. Aristocratic women wore luxurious chitons made of expensive fabrics, such as linen or silk, adorned with embroidery and other decorative elements. This emphasized their high social status and wealth. Middle-class women dressed more modestly, using simple materials like wool. Their chitons and peplos, although less adorned, still met the standards of modesty expected by society. On the other hand, slave women and women of lower classes wore simple and functional clothing made from coarse fabrics, which had no decorative elements, emphasizing their low social status and subordinate position [6].

In Sparta, where women had more freedom compared to Athens, their clothing reflected an active lifestyle and participation in physical training. Spartan women wore short chitons and chlamyses (*χλαμύδες*), which allowed them to participate in sports competitions and training, providing freedom of movement [7]. Such an attitude towards clothing reflected a more progressive approach to gender roles, where women were considered an important part of society, capable not only of performing household duties but also of actively contributing to strengthening the nation's physical strength. Plutarch even notes that during festivals, Spartan girls danced and sang without clothing, which was part of their upbringing in discipline and endurance [8].

In Rome, clothing also served as an important indicator of social status. Patrician women wore the stola, long dresses made from precious materials, which emphasized their high social status and were made from linen or wool. The palla, a cloak added to the stola when going out in public, was also a status symbol, used not only for protection from the cold but was an important part of fashion. Women of plebeian origin wore simpler and less expensive versions of the same clothing, made from wool. Slave women wore the simplest tunic, which had no decorative elements and emphasized their subordinate position [10]. Thus, clothing in each of these cultures was closely linked to their vision of gender roles. In Athens, women remained under strict control of social norms that emphasized their secondary role. Spartan women had more freedom, which was reflected in their functional clothing that suited their active lifestyle. In Rome, clothing emphasized the woman's status in society, particularly her role as the keeper of the home and family traditions. Clothing in these societies not only reflected but also shaped gender norms, influencing the social structure and relations between the sexes.

In the Pythagorean philosophical school, women played a significant role, transcending traditional gender constraints. They were not only students but also authors of their own works, actively contributing to the development of philosophical thought. Pythagorean women formed connections with other renowned philosophers and writers, such as Ptolemy and the philosophers of Mearete, indicating their influence and participation in the philosophical discussions of that time. Greek writers often used Pythagorean women as examples of women's capability in philosophy. Even if these images were partially fictional, they continued to live in cultural imagination, leaving their mark on the philosophical tradition.

The philosophy and moral wisdom of Pythagorean women encompassed various aspects of life. Melissa taught the doctrine of *oikeiosis*, offering advice on personal appearance; Mia emphasized that even a nurse could be virtuous; and Theano promoted ideas of emotional control. These women not only philosophized but also practiced their teachings in life, making significant contributions to moral philosophy. Some women of Ancient Greece, despite the general restrictions for their gender, managed to rise above societal limitations and gained recognition as poets, philosophers, leaders, and physicians. Agnodice of Athens, for example, became a renowned physician, which was a great achievement for a woman of that time. Similarly, Corinna of Tanagra was a famous poetess whose lyrical works were often compared to those of her contemporary Pindar, confirming her mastery and significant contribution to the literary traditions of her era.

Diogenes Laertius, in the eighth book of his work *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, writes about Theano, the wife of Pythagoras, and their daughter Damo. Theano, according to him, was not only Pythagoras's wife but also his student and the author of some philosophical sayings. Damo, in turn, received manuscripts from her father with the instruction never to pass them outside the family, highlighting her loyalty to her father's teachings even in the face of poverty.

Aristophanes' comedy "Lysistrata" is one of the most vivid works of ancient literature, demonstrating not only comedic situations but also the depth of social and political issues in ancient Greek society. Aristophanes portrays women not just as housewives but also as political activists capable of influencing men's decisions.

Lysistrata, the main heroine of the play, represents the image of a woman who goes beyond her traditionally assigned role. She organizes women from different city-states, uniting them to achieve a common goal—peace in Greece. This plot move emphasizes that women can and should participate in making important state decisions. Aristophanes, in “Lysistrata,” offers a bold and innovative idea for his time – that woman can and should be active participants in public life, especially in times of crisis. (Aristophanes, Lysistrata)

Women of Ancient Greece, such as Sappho from the island of Lesbos, whose poetic works dedicated to themes of love and passion were highly valued for their emotional depth and beauty. Agnodice of Athens, despite the restrictions for women, became one of the first known female physicians, demonstrating that women were capable of playing important roles beyond traditional duties. Agnodice is mentioned in ancient sources as the first known female doctor who practiced in Athens despite the prohibition of medical practice for women. The most famous story about her is found in the works of the Roman author Gaius Julius Hyginus in his work *Fabulae*. He tells how Agnodice, disguising herself as a man, studied medicine and treated women who often refused treatment from male doctors [11].

Conclusions: The study of the role of women in ancient societies has revealed that, despite the officially subordinate status of women, they often played important roles in various spheres of life. Their contributions to philosophy, literature, medicine, and other fields cannot be underestimated. On the other hand, the patriarchal structures of that time systematically limited their opportunities, which was reflected in social norms and laws. The analysis of cases such as Sparta and Rome show the diversity of approaches to gender roles in different ancient communities. While Spartan women had more freedom and physical capabilities, Roman women possessed certain legal rights that allowed them to actively influence public life. Athenian women, on the contrary, were more isolated from public life, which once again underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of the topic. Thus, the study has shown that it is necessary to reconsider traditional notions about the role of women in ancient societies, taking into account their real impact on social, political, and cultural processes. This will allow for a more objective picture of gender relations in ancient communities and enrich contemporary approaches to studying gender history.

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