Women in the Hellenistic World: Issues, Evidence, and Conclusions

I. Introduction
The sort of question one might ask to frame this set of issues might be: what evidence do we have for an increase in women’s roles and rights in the Hellenistic period (323 – 31 BC) of Greek history?

A couple of things to think about first: women’s status and roles are meaningful only in comparison with something else. What is meaningful to compare is the status and roles of Hellenistic Greek women compared to the status and roles of either Greek women before or after the Hellenistic era to try to understand what changed and why.

For the Classical period (478 – 323 BC), the advice that Pericles gives to Athenian women in his funeral oration in 431 BC as recorded in Thucydides 2.45.2 is often regarded as typical of male Greek attitudes toward women period. In this speech, which is otherwise full of stirring and admirable patriotic encouragements to all the Athenians, he says this short aside to the women: “On the other hand, if I must say anything on the subject of female excellence to those of you who will now be in widowhood, it I will be all comprised in this brief exhortation. Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked about among the men whether for good or for bad.” If this is representative of typical Athenian attitudes, and if Athenian attitudes are typical of Greek attitudes (not likely, but no evidence exists to contradict this), then our vision of women in the Classical period will be rather sad.

The Hellenistic period seems to see some increases in women’s status and roles over the previous two periods. It will be useful to start with high-ranking women (royal and non-royal elites) and then the limited evidence for middle- and lower-class women.

II.
Unambiguous evidence exists for many high-ranking women achieving much power and authority in this period.

1. Royal female power:
a.) Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great and one of the wives of Philip II, was a dominant force in the Macedonian kingdom. She even intimidated her husband Philip. After Philip’s death, she was a prime power in Macedon and antagonist of Antipater. After Alexander died, she became even more powerful. She entered negotiations with Eumenes, fought Cassander, and dangled her daughter Kleopatra as marriage bait. She seems to have been consecrated as a goddess after her death.

b.) Phila, daughter of Antipater and sister of Cassander, was a pivotal figure in this period. She was the wife of Krateros and of Demetrios Poliorketes, mother of Antigonus Gonatos. A shrewd person.
c.) Arsinoë II was perhaps the most celebrated of Hellenistic queens. She was married to her brother Ptolemy, was a patron of the famed Alexandrian poet Theokritos whose poems still exist, and became a standard for portraiture. She was officially deified, perhaps during her lifetime. She and Ptolemy were jointly deified as theoi adelphoi. The Chremonidean decree commemorating Ptolemy gives credit to Arsinoë.


d.) The influence of other royal ladies was big, as role models.

e.) And queens became benefactrices of communities. We have records of a profusion of temple building, private bequests, etc. by women. Gifts of cash are recorded in inscriptions from women to cities, gifts of grain, olive oil, wine, and meat for communities. This probably means that women owned grain-producing land, vineyards, olive groves, and ranches. Or were they simply spending their husbands’ money? This could be the case, but why have we so few gifts recorded from women in the Classical period? What accounts for the change in the Hellenistic period?

2.) Non-royal ladies:

a.) Women are honored in various Hellenistic cities with statues. They occupy many prominent priestly offices which are magistracies unto themselves.

b.) Rarely but occasionally we have evidence that women occupy non-priestly magistracies in cities.

c.) We see recorded public distinctions for female foreigners.

d.) It seems that the Hellenistic era offered some women notoriety, public influence, and absolutely unprecedented wealth.

3.) Arts and Sciences.

a.) Women’s education had been unthinkable even in the beginning of the Hellenistic age, as Theophrastos seems to tell us.

b.) Women’s names appear later, though, on documents and contracts, suggesting literacy; and we have terra cotta figurines of girls reading.

c.) Further, we have mentions of women poets. There is Erina of Telos who won much recognition. She wrote a touching tribute to a childhood friend.

d.) Other spheres of the arts feature women making their mark, such as portraiture and architecture. There is Polygnota of Thebes, the celebrated harpist, who was a hit at Delphi and won many serious awards.

e.) The Hellenistic period sees the advent of women in scholarly and philosophical pursuits such as Agelas of Kerkyra.
f.) A woman even wrote a treatise on whether or not the Trojan War had occurred in Troy.

g.) Philosophical schools as a bastion of maleness were opened a little.

i.) Epicurus, founder of one of the most important and famous Hellenistic philosophical systems, preached sexual equality.

ii.) The Cynics welcomed the entrance of women, including Hipparchia who became enraptured with the more extreme Cynic doctrines and enraptured also with Krates whom she wanted to marry, making her wealthy parents desperate.

III.
Non-elite women. Outside the realm of aristocrats and intellectuals, evidence is thinner.

a.) The greater physical mobility of persons and families in the Hellenistic period meant that women were thrown on their own resources. This may have been an avenue for more independent thought. It also may have given more freedom to women vis-a-vis long-standing traditions of their village or town, which a migration will have disrupted.

b.) Marriage contracts on papyri from Hellenistic Egypt are often fragmentary but give us a sense of this institution, which was like a prenuptial contract today. The insecure circumstances in this rootless society required these sorts of marriage contracts. In these contracts, the wives’ privileges are given as much attention as the husbands’ privileges.
From the city of Elephantinoi, up the Nile, there is the earliest wedding contract we have. It is from 311 (BC, obviously). It gives full acknowledgment of the prerogative of the woman, Demetria, and it forbids adultery on Demetria’s part, but also imposes comparable constraints on Heraklites her husband: he must pay twice her dowry if he is convicted of adultery.

Contracts like this are probably not from people in the very low reaches of society. They come from the middle class and above, but these contracts are not limited to the elite.

IV.
Portrayal of women in the era’s literature: we have male depictions of the female, but not the way they saw themselves. These depictions suggest, however, that women have higher status now than before.

The courtesans in the plays by the early Hellenistic Athenian playwright Menander are not only playthings but have (manipulative) power. They have the right to choose their own company. Not chattel.

The Alexandrian poet par excellence Theokritos, in his 15th Idyll, portrays two housewives in Alexandria gossiping and complaining about the high cost of living -- but significantly, they still have time to see an exhibition at the palace.
In the tongue-in-cheeks mimoι of the poet Herondas, two women discuss the virtues of a leather dildo, referred to as a “pacifier,” made by a shoemaker. The very fact that female sexuality is a subject for literature outside the comic stage is important unto itself.

The age-old debate on which of the genders enjoys sex more was crystallized in the Hellenistic period: Hera and Zeus debated this and asked Tiresias, the long-lived soothsayer (who appeared, among other places, in Sophokles’ plays of the fifth century BC such as Oedipus Rex). Tiresias had lived both as a man and as a woman. He tells them in this Hellenistic work that women enjoy intercourse nine times more than men do.

It can be not unreasonably argued from these examples that many writers of the Hellenistic period had a healthy respect for female sexuality and did not reduce it to the roles of passive housewife and sex object.

V.

The Hellenistic era did offer a more varied local landscape than the Archaic or Classical eras did for many folks, but continuities with the traditional female roles in the past may have been stronger than the changes.

Naturally for a pre-industrial society, we do not see political equality between males and females: no right to hold office or vote. The exceptions we see are when cities or towns vote gratitude to benefactrices by offering citizenship to them. There is a tiny, tiny proportion of women who gained such honors.

In essence, women had, it may be argued, no more political rights than did slaves.

The ruling circles of Hellenistic kingdoms feature strong women, but even the strong women usually played fairly or extremely passive roles. Marriages dissolved when they were unprofitable. Olympias was a commanding presence, but Alexander the Great made it clear to her that Antipater would be in charge. Philia was an admirable person, but it was as a daughter of Antipater that she was considered a good match – not on her own.

Arsinoë did not deserve all the claims to power that she has been accorded.

In Egypt, wealthy women were few in number. Settlers had a right to lease out their land, but of 372 known cases, only 3 were women. And none of the dowries in wedding contracts include land as part of the bequest.

The rare woman physician or scholar was invariably the daughter of a prominent man of that profession, who came into prominence as assistant, usually because the man had no sons.

Some women were indeed in schools, especially the philosophical schools of Epicurus and the Cynics. But the Stoic doctrine of equality did not include sexual equality, and Aristotle’s school, the Peripatetics, excluded women in deference to Aristotle.
Timothy Doran

In the lower echelons, marriage contracts were not exactly equal obligations. Trouble was standard in marriage contracts. The will of Aristotle designated male guardians for his heir. Zeno the Stoic’s instructions include grain distribution for workers. Women and children receive a half-distribution.

Some emancipation did exist for some women, but most were unprestigious.

Female liberation for Hellenistic women did not bring a marked improvement in the fate of all.

No free women of independent means are portrayed in Menander’s plays. Rosy portraits of courtesans must conceal grim realities.

Exposure of unwanted infants seems to show a decided preference for keeping males alive. A very famous papyrus in Egypt written by a man to his wife orders her to save the baby if it is male, but expose it if it is female. Abandonment of female babies probably increased in the Hellenistic period with increased mobility. Daughters might be useful on a farm, but cumbersome for soldiers and aristocrats. In some Greek cities, women went about veiled; in others it was illegal to for them to have a shop.

A neo-Pythagorean treatise reads, “a woman must live for her husband, taking no private thoughts of her own; she must endure his temper and agree with him.” This is supposedly written by a woman; that sounds doubtful to us. The world in which these women operated was still very much a male-dominated society.

VI.
Lest this collapse into a moralistic diatribe against the unfairness of past societies, we must examine larger-scale demographic and economic constraints of the Hellenistic world. Many words have been spoken and written regarding the inequality of women’s roles compared to men’s roles in the ancient Greek world, whether Archaic, Classical, or Hellenistic periods; the word “chattel” is often used, and women are sometimes likened to slaves.

But we must remember that it is meaningless to contrast Hellenistic women’s status and roles against the status and roles that someone thinks women should have had in some sort of feminist utopia that has never existed and may very well never exist. Or that may exist but be unsustainable for more than one generation.

It is similarly meaningless to compare (and find wanting) the roles and status of Hellenistic women to what we see for women in the early 21st century: our society is radically different in terms of technology, particularly medical, military, and food-producing technology, and it is this, more than anything else, that has produced huge differences in possibilities for women’s roles. The demographer Philip Longman’s excellent article on patriarchy in the March/April 2006 issue of Foreign Policy explains this, and I recommend it to anyone interested in why women’s roles were so limited in pre-industrial settled societies. It is easily available online for free.
From all the evidence available from all pre-industrial settled societies (as opposed to both industrialized settled societies and pre-industrial nomadic societies, which have radically different modes of production) there are apparently are certain broad common constraints on women’s roles in these societies. The topic of these constraints has been a topic that has attracted many heated debates whether these limitations have had more to do with something that is called misogyny or something else.

It can be easy to forget the needs of populations to maintain their numerical strength in highly warlike environments without stable international peace-keeping agreements. A look at the number of wars between the Hellenistic successors shows us that numerical strength was essential for all societies to avoid annihilation or slavery. And this situation occurred when infants and children needed constant nursing in an era before formula and refrigeration. And it occurred in an era wherein women had to bear an average of 6 children in order to keep up replacement rates for the population – and wherein women themselves had a average lifespan in their 20s. Demographers also tell us that female independence is closely correlated with lowered fertility in all demographic regimes. We have to ask ourselves whether it is better for a society to drop alarmingly in numbers but keep female status high, when dropping in numbers in such a competitive environment could be utterly disastrous for the entire society, or keep female roles centered around the reproductive arts but at least have the whole society survive.

It is all too easy to ignore the macro-economic, macro-political, and macro-demographic constraints of pre-industrial settled societies. It is more these constraints that forced women into domestic roles, rather than misogyny. And the cultural strand of misogyny that we see in plays, literature, and art of the period was largely a result of, rather than a cause of, the limitations in women’s roles formed by the larger system. If almost all the women in a society have had their lives centered around having children, then female culture will revolve around reproduction and the tasks attached to it, such as weaving. And if almost all the women that you have seen have had their lives perforce centered around reproduction, it is not inconceivable that cultural attitudes could arise which assert various forms of inferiority for women. The constraints are dictated by the mode of (re)production that is inherent of societies like this at this technological level. Thus the mode of (re)production is probably previous to the cultural attitudes about female inferiority.

Even Pericles’ speech, which belongs to the period before the Hellenistic period, must be thought about a bit more carefully in terms of its context. It was delivered during a period of very bloody war between Athens and Sparta. The text given occurs very, very shortly after a passage concerned with the necessity of having more children in order to restock Athens’ military. If female lives are perforce dedicated to reproduction in these sorts of societies, and if the purpose of the speech as a whole was to encourage the Athenians to keep fighting and not submit to Sparta, and the Athenians were depressed about losing so many of their boys in the war, then a focus on having children as efficiently as possible is quite understandable. A highly deadly plague had also struck Athens. In these dire
circumstances, Pericles cannot expect to have directed his attention toward a new revolutionary programme for the advancement of women’s rights.

A better way to look at the rights of Hellenistic women, and of Greek women in general, will be to investigate whether they had worse or better rights than women in similar technological regimes at a similar point in history. Only through such comparative work can we assert that the Hellenistic world was very much a male society. It is probable that all we will be able to say is that all settled pre-industrial societies featured similar constraints on women’s roles and status, and that with technological advance often a broad opening of these roles arises. This is certainly what the disciplines of demography and economics have discovered. When we see variations on this pattern among settled pre-industrial societies, we can speculate upon and investigate the differences at play.