Citizenship and the Social Position of Athenian Women in the Classical Age

- A prospect for overcoming the antithesis of male and female -

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I. Introduction

Misunderstanding has been widely spread regarding the relationship among men, women and slaves. It used to be said that the ancient Greek polis was composed of male-citizens, and women did not have any franchise so that they were similar to slaves.

However, in contemporary texts women were called also citizens like men. It is proved in the nomenclature of men and women: *astos/aste* and *polites/politis*.

These days Western scholars nearly do not deny that women were citizens just as men were. The discussion, however, refers to whether their social status was inferior or equal to that of men.
Citizenship differentiated from franchise

Why did it come to be a kind of common sense notion that citizenship was appropriated only to men, and not women?
In all likelihood, it is due to the fact that only men could take part in the assembly to vote and they, not women, served in the military forces.

In my opinion, however, this misconception impedes accurate comprehension of not only citizenship but comprehensively the whole ancient Athenian society. Also the concept of citizenship has to be differentiated from that of franchise. If the latter is related to the activity of voting and serving in the military, i.e. taking part in the political affairs (*metechein politeias*), the former is more comprehensive referring to every kind of initiative including economic and social rights.
Generally, in ancient society the proportion of political activity in everyday life was less than in the modern. Various categories of social group, family, clan (gene), tribe (phyle), kome (village), or other religious or vocational groups, had more gravity rather, or no less, than, those related to political affairs.

Ancient society was a multi-centric one, and the influence of kinship society was relatively stronger than that of the modern age. When we talk about the women who had citizenship, it means that they enjoyed social or economic rights or privileges which were not political.
Since the beginning of the 20th century, controversy has appeared regarding the social status of Athenian women.

There have been extremely polarized opinions presented: the Athenian women were isolated in the house under the pressure of the men commanding an andro-centric society on the one hand, and they were considerably free to take initiatives at home as well as in the arena of non-domestic social activities on the other.

There was also an intermediate position to reconcile the two extremities. For example, Lacey accepted that the Athenian women’s activities were restricted within house, being isolated from society, but suggested it was due to the mechanism protecting them rather than the oppression of men.
However, the conception of so called ‘women’ as a whole is quite ambiguous. Pomeroy argued that there is a fundamental deficiency on the discussion of women’s social position, since women is discussed as a whole.

Pomeroy categorized them according to social or economic status into *citizens, metoikoi* (resident foreigner), *and slaves*. These categories, as Pomeroy says, are applied not only to men but women, so that the long-pending dispute on the status of women could not result in a successive conclusion, because the question is based on the faulty premise which concerns just the relative position of women to men.
First point to discuss

- This essay is to review Athenian women’s social status on **two points of dispute**.

- First, like men, women could be divided into different categories: **citizens and non-citizens**. Further, the qualification of citizenship could change according to epoch and region. Moreover, even among citizenship types there could be differences, complete or incomplete.

- On the other hand, sometimes there were no clear distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. In this case, the distinction itself among citizens, non-citizens and slaves does not have any significance. In case of need, citizenship was ever granted to resident foreigners. Thus, **standardized and stagnant dualism which divides citizens and non-citizens as well as men and women should be refused**.
Second point to discuss

- The second point is how to properly understand the literary sources, whose contents seem contradictory concerning women’s social status. In my opinion, a clue could be found to solve the problem if we suppose that the sources which disparage women do not reflect the reality itself, but expectations which have not been fully realized.

- And the confrontation which seems superficially to be between men and women does not refer to the division of biological sex or gender, but eventually to the difference of orientation in social mechanism between moderation and indulgence, or between peace and war.
II. Comprehensive and various concepts of citizenship and Women

According to Aristotle, citizenship could not be the base criterion, because the components of citizenship alternate repeatedly like river and spring.

Athenian society was dualistic, which was proved already from the time of Cleisthenes: political organization on the one hand, and traditional clan (gene), tribe (phratriai), religious group (hyerosynai) on the other. The Athenian constitution (XXI. 2-6) refers to co-existence of both new and traditional after Cleisthenes’ renovation of the political organization.

Actually in the literary sources, ‘aste (city woman)’ is more frequently used than ‘politis’ (i.e. woman with a qualification related to the ‘polis’). Potentially the former is a more comprehensive concept including every kind of socio-economic qualification, not to speak of complete or incomplete citizenship
III. Contradictory sources & harmonious matching of them

1. Opinions to Contradictory sources

Pomeroy mentioned that opinion differs according to which sources one selects.

She says, that the discussions on women’s social status are closely related to appraisals regarding the value of sources. Whoever regarded that Antigone and Electra in Aischylos and Sophocles represented the Athenian women in the 5th century concluded that women’s position was considerably esteemed (Gomme), but those, depending on the orations and other literary sources of prose, appraised women to be in an inferior situation.

According to Pomeroy, Lacy and Ehrenberg depended greatly on the Attic orators, while Gomme did hardly quote them.
To the contrary, there is a suggestion that various aspects, sometimes even contradictory, of women show the periodical developments of actual women’s social status.

In the first half of the 20th century Botsford, argued that the works of Aischylos and the images described on the vases prove the importance of women’s roles or their free status, but the texts in Pericles’ memorial address and in Stobaios show women’s inferior status.

Botsford says that during one and a half century since the earlier days of Solon women enjoyed free lives, but in the time of Pericles heir situation deteriorated, and in Medeia of Euripides the women began to revolt again.
Antipathy to Jingoism

- In my opinion, however, the different points of view of literary sources does not necessarily show chronological developments as Botsford suggested. Instead of it, the negative comments on women’s activities could be supposed not to coincide exactly with the contemporary situation but are no more than expectations on a part of society, and women did not always behave according to such wishes.

- Especially in the second half of the 5th century B.C. when the result of war, for which the men sacrificed themselves as soldiers, was almost brought to a deadlock, most women, seeking peace, resisted the initiatives of jingoism, such as described in *Lysistrata*. Their resistance, however, was not against all men, but militaristically-oriented men.
Just advising women’s subjugation which is not a reality

The eulogy of Pericles for the restrained women is a kind of counterevidence for the notion that the women actually did not observe the so called virtue. And it should be underscored that women’s virtue of reticence or temperance is just ‘advised’ the examples of which are as follows:

Xenophon, *Oikonomikos*, VII, Maidens in the age prior to 15 years old 5 [i.e. before assuming grave responsibility (*polle epimeleia*) as a matriarch of the house] have to be educated to see the least, to hear the least, and to question the least. 

Euripides, F. 521 Women are advised to stay at home keeping grace (*chreon esthlen*)...

The existence of such advice suggests that the reality of the situation must have been contrary to the advice.
Lysistrata (i.e. dissolving warfare).

- Then, it has been noticed that social requirements of submissive virtue of the women became more salient in the age of Pericles’ lifetime, the second half of the 5th century, than before. Concurrently, it was the time when antipathy against war and the unrestrained wantonness of ekklesia rose to the surface.

- *Lysistrata* of Aristophanes was a paragon of the antiwar sentiment. The name of the female protagonist Lysistrata means ‘dissolving army’, which is a symbol of the author’s intention.

In *Lysistrata*, the men complained that the women whose support they contributed to rose in revolt against them.

*Lysistrata 260~265.* The women whom at home we fed, like witless fools, with fostering bread, have impiously come to this— They've stolen the Acropolis, with bolts and bars our orders flout and shut us out.

The expression ‘the women whom at home we fed, like witless fools’ in this text has been quoted as a proof of the degraded social position of women. Men’s insults disparaging women do not at all guarantee the actual women’s situation, even if they wanted to subjugate them under their own domination.
To the contrary, Lysistrata retorts against the men, insisting that women are the main source of sovereignty to run a household. Furthermore, she denounces men who have provoked a war which has resulted in a deadlock, and their power-oriented propensity.

It is shown in this text that **men and women quarrel with each other over priority.** Women were not just confined inside the house weaving clothes, but assumed the responsibility for the household economy.

On the other hand, men’s authority was based on increased political initiatives as well as jingoism which had never existed previously. The Women tried to dissolve men’s business, and expand the ethics of the household to the field of state. **If only women could succeed in a sexual strike to make men conclude warfare, all the women could be called Lysimachos (i.e. dissolving warfare).**
IV. War and peace

1. Jingoistic woman and idyllic man

The motif of *Lysistrata* is the confrontation between men seeking after warfare and women pitted against them. Actually, however, it is not necessarily the case for all the men to be warlike, and all the women to be peace-oriented. For example, in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, the roles of man and woman are reversed in comparison with that of *Lysistrata*. The mother wants her son to succeed politically, while the father advises him to come back to an idyllic rural life.

The key point is that the confrontation is never between two genders, but between individual propensities.

[The wife who was Megacles’ nephew from an illustrious politically active family tried to add the word horse(*hippos*) to their son’s name, but her husband Strepsiades opposed her as he preferred ‘Philonides (*phil+onos*)’ which meant ‘loving rural pony (*onos*)’. In the end, the two opinions were synthesized but the wife’s opinion proved stronger than the husband’s, so that the name results in ‘Phidippides’ with the meaning of ‘loving horse’. From this episode it is shown that even women could be power-oriented no less than men, while there could be men who preferred a rural life and detested the political life of the city.]
2. Increase of social inequality and the contrast between rural and city areas

In the second half of the 5th century B.C. the Delian League degenerated into the Athenian maritime empire and the gravity of politics and warfare in society increased. This resulted in the opportunity for the men to devise economic profits as well as social promotion.

On the opposite side of society, however, there were two social groups which suffered relative disadvantage.

One is the women of the households who degenerated to become relatively inferior to men who energetically assumed the affairs of political and military business;

and the other is the agricultural farmer in rural, idyllic areas. The movement of the rural population into the city progressed after the victory of the Persian War, This was due to Aristeides who advised the Athenians to come down from their farms and live in the city.
Women against maritime empire

- Thus, the increase of the city population was due to adjustment according to the establishment of the Athenian maritime empire.

- In *Lysistrata*, the women complains against the fact that a lot of funds had been for the war, which was provoked by the men after the Persian War. And they reprimand the men who made their children disappear in the war.

- On the other hand, the women end the war by use of the spiritual weapons of ‘persuasion’ and ‘rationalism’, recovering peace for the households as well as all Greece. The men come back from the war field, the thrifty life keeps going through wedding and the labor of idyllic rural life, and the love of a ‘household couple (*nymphikon*)’ increased.
Idea of extreme communism as a resistance to militaristic campaign

- In *Ekklesiazusai* Athenian men made a living mostly supported by money paid by the assembly (ekklesia) and the courts. Blepyros, the man who has been deprived by the women of the initiative of managing city-state, hears from the chorus that it is not necessary to raise his family with the money earned by serving as a judge.

- And silver of private property and Persian gold are contrasted with the property of co-ownership which the women would secure. The Idea of extreme communism presented in *Ekklesiazusai* is a result of resistance to the side-effects due to militaristic campaign and the pursuit of hegemony.

- Thus, the contrast between rural, idyllic, and communal life on the one hand, and urban, political and aggressive life on the other, was not static but advanced in an incessant conflict among the constituents of different propensities.
V. Conclusion

- This paper refers to the confrontation between militarism and pacifism of Athenian society. The more hegemonic militarism goes forward, the more women's position in the home as well as in society goes down.

- And, we cannot say that all the evidence to enforce women's submission and silence represent a reality, but surely, at least some of them are just a hope of the men who are military-tropic.

- Furthermore, The relation between the sexes should be regarded not as static, but as one of constant tension and competition. When the affairs the men pursue do not go well, the women immediately confront them.

- On the other hand, there could be males who want a pastoral life, and females who aim for the militaristic ideology of power. Women still could feel a proxy satisfaction by the worldly success of husband or sons, having a sense of superiority against other social classes or other women.

- Thus, the competition is ultimately to be extended to one's tenet of life, beyond the difference of the sexes.