

WOMEN AND WORK

Running the house

Women from wealthy families spent almost all their time at home, shut away from the outside world, and receiving visits only from family members and female friends. But this did not mean they were idle. Running a household was a full-time job.

Queen bees

One Greek writer described a wife as a queen bee, keeping the workers busy. Servants cooked, cleaned and cared for anyone who was ill. Outdoor workers went on errands to buy food, carry messages, accompany boys to school, or sell household produce. They also brought goods and news into the house from outside. Houses, especially in the countryside, were built with space to store produce such as grain, oil, wine and fleece. The mistress of the household was responsible for making sure that these were safely stored and managed, so that supplies did not run out before the next harvest.

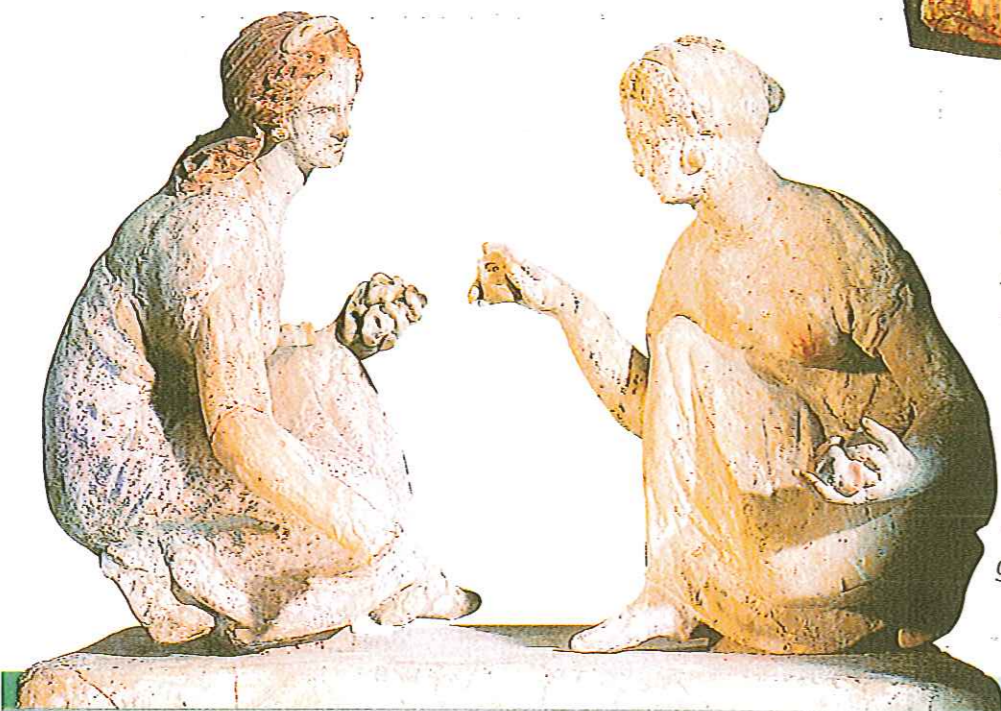
It's not easy for a woman to get out and about. She has to look after her husband, make sure the servant girl does her work, tuck the baby up in bed, wash it, feed it...

FROM *LYSISTRATA*, A PLAY BY ARISTOPHANES, WHO LIVED ABOUT 450-385 BC



A woman with her maid, who holds the woman's jewellery box. Wives were responsible for training servants and for supervising their day to day work.

Wealthy women had some leisure time in the home, and knucklebones was a favourite game for women and girls.



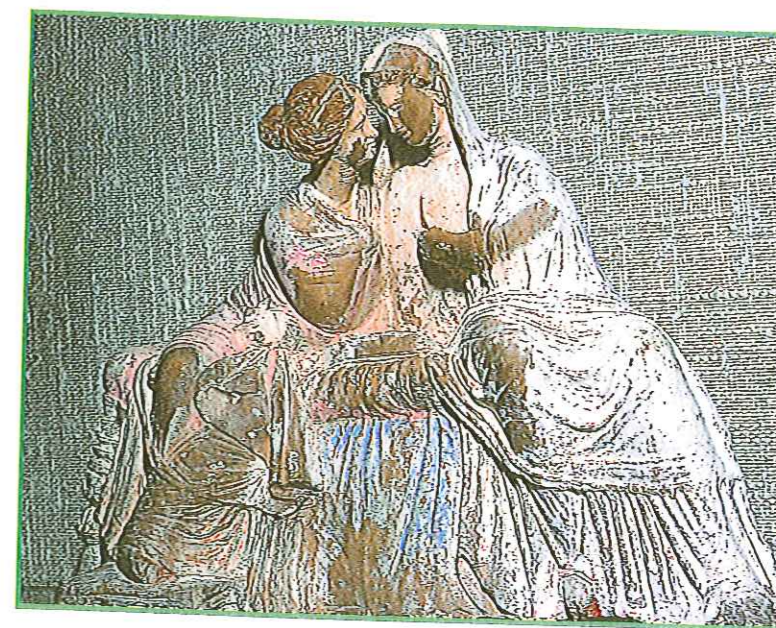
Women's work

Indoor workers were mostly women. The Greeks believed that women were softer and more delicate than men, and suited to work in a sheltered environment. Wives were responsible for training other women to do their jobs, and for making sure they performed them well. Their most important work in the home was to make textiles. In cities, most outdoor workers were male.

Power at home

Many married women held a great deal of power. Some husbands gave their wives complete control of the household budget, handing over money for food, fuel and other essentials. Wives were also responsible for guarding the house while their husbands were away from home. In times of war, this might be for months. Many Greek poems and plays refer to wives who question their husbands closely and intelligently about politics, law cases and current affairs, and tell them how they should vote in the lawcourts or at Assembly meetings. Comic plays show this from a different viewpoint and tell how clever, cunning wives (sometimes helped by female servants) trick their husbands, or manage them skilfully, to get their own way.

Ordinary women worked hard. Housework was a dirty, tiring, never-ending task. This clay model shows a woman lighting a wood fire.



Although wealthy women spent their lives indoors, they were not cut off from the outside world. Neighbours called to share gossip, and older women could give girls advice. Slaves also brought back news from the street and the marketplace.

Hard labour

For poor women, life was rather different. Ordinary women had no slaves or servants to help run the house, but had to do everything themselves. This meant going out to buy food and fetch water, and working as cooks or cleaners, or helping care for farm animals or weed crops in the fields. Some left the house to work as cooks, nannies, servants, grape-pickers, barmaids and garland-weavers. In the markets, they also sold many different foods, such as seeds, garlic and vegetables, grown in family gardens, or gathered wild from the hills. They also ran stalls selling fresh-cooked pancakes and bread.

