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*Female education and women domestic  
servants in nineteenth-century  
greek society*

YOUNG FEMALE SERVANTS CONSTITUTED A WIDESPREAD SOCIAL phenomenon in Greece during nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Single females who left the parental household in order to work, were disparaged by society. The reason why they asked for a placement in wealthy families was to earn money so as to escape from extreme poverty. Moreover, they planned to save enough cash in order to buy a house, which constituted the most important part of their dowry, along with the purchasing of linen and household utensils. But amassment of enough cash “delayed their marriages while enhancing their dowries” (Hionidou, 2005, 473-489). Above all, the poor girls’ life was at risk because they often faced the danger of being raped in the domestic service where they were employed. Newspapers frequently published long articles describing their exploitation and ill-treatment. By writing reports on the issue, the press tried to excite the public feeling about the young female servants’ bleak lives that they experienced in wealthy Athenian families.

An example was the Greek journalist Vlassis Gavriilidis who was the manager, chief editor and columnist of the Athenian newspaper Akropolis (1883). Gavriilidis wrote many articles on the matter with the view to making the public feeling sensitive to the problem. In one of his articles in the Akropolis he wrote: “The house maids’ ill-treatment must become a case-study. These maids constitute a separate social class. They are the persons who suffer and are unfairly treated...[...]They are trying only to survive...]. They should neither get tortured, nor abused, underpaid, beaten, sacrificed, dishonoured or become prostitutes” (Sardelis, 2005, 59-60).

In an effort to alert the public on this social problem, Gavriilidis raised his voice again through the columns of his newspaper and tried to protect the “unlucky” young girls by warmly defending their rights as human beings and fellow-citizens. The *Akropolis* was one of the few newspapers which stood on the side of the young maids in Athens. The same newspaper also reported on the case of another female-servant who had been raped by her master. According to the account of facts, the desperate girl shot her rapist dead in a central area in Athens (Sardelis, K., *ibid.*, 145)

Moreover, illiteracy among them was high. By and large, the lack of education in the female population of the poor classes throughout nineteenth century was a vexing social problem that had to be solved. The newly established Greek state invoked financial difficulties and could not supply young women with schooling, thus, giving the priority to boys’ education alone. But the decade of 1880s became a hallmark for women’s awakening when time was considered ripe for broad socio-economic changes while efforts were made for a fresh start. The emergence of the middle and upper middle class in the Greek cities brought up onto the surface the problem of female illiteracy. Newspapers and journals took a positive attitude to female education with the feminist weekly *Ephemeris ton Kyrion* (Ladies’ Journal) being at the forefront, the editor of which was an educated active woman called Kallirrhoe Parren. The journal signalled the beginning of the formation of an organized feminist identity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek society and also laid the foundations for the shaping of a new female model. The goal of the *Ephemeris ton Kyrion* was “to awaken the [Greek] women, to rouse their dormant sense of power, to give them determination and self-confidence, as these two qualities had been suppressed during the centuries’ slavery and barbarity”. The journal defended women’s rights for access to education and employment in a period when female population was exhorted to regard home as their only proper sphere.

### *Female illiteracy and women -domestic servants*

In nineteenth century Greece women’s position was at a disadvantage to that of men’s as female gender was considered to be inferior. Based on the prevailing notion that women had to stay at home, the right for access

to schooling seemed to be only a dream that would never come to be true. Despite the total absence of female education in the popular classes, women played an important role within the sphere of their domestic duties as mothers, spouses and housewives because they were the persons who influenced the members of their family circle. Seen female illiteracy from the angle of social discrimination and inequality of opportunities, a part of educated men such as university teachers, educators, writers, as well as some politicians, became conscious of the fact that society had to do something in order to supply girls with the basic knowledge.

Right after the 1821 Greek Revolution for Independence many people coming from the Greek- speaking communities of abroad, settled in the new country. During the first decades of the century, in Ermoupolis -the capital city of the Greek island of Syros- as well as in the island of Aegina and in the city of Argos, schools for girls were set up. Later on, Athens was the hub of the national educational activity especially after 1834, when it became the capital city of the newly -shaped country.

In 1836 an education society called “Society for the Friends of Education” (Philekpedeutiki Etaireia) established a school for girls in Athens with the aim to supplying them with the proper schooling, so that young women could better fit in their roles as good mothers and housewives (Thanailaki, Polly, 2005,138, 145,243). A few years earlier (1832), another school for girls had been set up in the same city by the American protestant missionary couple John and Francis Hill (*Ibid.*, 134-160). Financial reasons made things difficult for the Greek state to establish female public schools. Consequently, girls’ education had to rest upon the private sector alone. As a result of this fact, the school curricula were designed only for the daughters of the urban elite parents who could afford paying high fees.

In Greece, the educational reforms for female schooling came much later than in other countries, mainly at the turn of nineteenth century. Moreover, education was highly centralised and was managed by the Greek Ministry of Education. Schooling was institutionalized with Decrees issued in 1834, 1836 and 1837 by the Greek Ministry in order to define the different piers of schooling. In 1834 women’s right for access to primary education was secured but the articles of the Decree were not put in practice. Besides, figures showing the general school attendance of the girls’ schools in the cities was very low, while in the rural areas female illiteracy was extremely high (Thanailaki, Polly, 2008). The study of the structure of the Greek population proves that after the 1834 Decree which

made elementary schooling compulsory to both sexes, education progressed but still it had long way to go. A big number of students never graduated schools –this case mostly applied to the children of poor agrarian regions- because they had to work outside in the fields with their parents in order to supplement the family’s income (Dertilis, G.B., 2005, 245: Hopfner, Johanna, 2007: Hanztaroula, Pothiti, 2008, chapter 5). Speaking in terms of figures, in 1870 the illiterate persons came up to 82% of the total population of the country, 71% of which were men and 94% were women (Dertilis, *ibid.*, 244-245). Thus, the establishment of female schools was directly related to local financial factors. The more remote and mountainous a region was, the higher female illiteracy was observed. For example, in continental Greek areas such as Laconia, the girls’ school attendance was almost non-existent, contrasted to the islands where female participation in classes was higher (Sakkis, D.A., 2001, 277).

In the course of time, female illiteracy started to drop contrasted to the past, but still prejudices existed regarding the supplied general knowledge and the professional skills, thus, influencing the pace of progress which remained slow. The places that created better conditions for building up female education were those which showed greater indexes in financial growth being the big cities of Athens, Pireus and Patras. By contrast, access to knowledge for girls was not considered of primary importance in the poor rural regions. Differentiation in the goals of women’s schooling was observed in the population of the islands where local societies were more alert and more sensitive in supplying the girls with education, the reason being their multicultural character. According to the prevailing notion there, girls had to receive proper education so that they could become useful citizens. This premise created a new dimension and signalled the beginning of a different attitude in women’s social position and future prospects.

More precisely, on the island of Thira (Santorini) in the Cyclades complex, the local people had plans for promulgating female education to all social classes and for this reason they decided to cover the expenses of an elementary school for girls themselves (Sakkis, *ibid.*, 75-76). This happened in the first period of the formation of the Greek State (1833-1848), when girls were potentially entitled to receive the same benefits in primary education with boys, but this did not really become true because the country lacked in the necessary school infrastructure as it was short of funds. In 1840 the inhabitants of Thira decided to materialize their plans, “because they wished to render the girls useful to the society”. But fe-

male education on the island was short-lived because of the economic crisis that the area suffered. As a consequence, people decided to close the school (*Ibid.*, 76). The case of Thira documents the fact that in periods of difficult economic situations women-and more precisely the poor ones- were the victims, as they were the persons who had to give up schooling and, as a consequence, many of them had to go to the big cities to look for a placement in the domestic service.

In Greece the establishment of charity schools mainly started in the decade of 1870- 1880. The ladies of philanthropy, following the example of their European peers, established schools for the needy young women in order to provide them with food, shelter and the basics in hygiene. The girls were also supplied with the rudiments in education and were taught domestic crafts, such as needle work, tailoring clothes, weaving or knitting (Thanailaki, Polly, 2009, 195-202). The first efforts for establishing charity schools for poor and orphan girls were made as early as 1855 with the setting up of the “Amaliion Orphanage” which ran under the auspices of Queen Amalia who gave her name to it. The main purpose of the orphanage was to supply young women with professional skills in domestic crafts and prepare them proficiently as house maids or “wise housewives” (Tzanaki, Demetra, 2007, 238). According to its school syllabus of 1856, the girls were taught reading, writing, arithmetic in order to keep home accounts, the basics in Geography, Greek history and catechism (*Ibid.*, 238).

In late nineteenth century the large majority of female servants entered domestic service at a very young age of ten or younger. They were peasant girls, orphans, or very poor children who were sent by their families to work in wealthy homes. The girls had no education and no good manners and they also ignored the basics in housekeeping. Very often the lady of the house had to try hard in order to teach them how to do the housework and how to behave properly (*Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, 1888, issue 72, 2-3). So, at the turn of the century working-women fell into two main categories: those who came from Athens, and those coming from the mainland or the islands who arrived in the capital city searching for a placement. The Athenian-born women were usually employed in factories as workers and were more privileged than the others because they lived in their parental house. The other category comprised of the underprivileged ones who had to leave their families in order to find a job while the only choice they had, was to become maids in order to provide themselves with a shelter as live-in servants, along with food, protection

and a small amount of cash. The young girls of the second category were very poor often wearing ragged clothes, were shoeless while their diet was meagerly, unbalanced, small in quantity and poor in quality, sometimes constituting only of some “brown bread”. Their dream was to work in the big city of Athens, live with a wealthy family, have enough meals, and wear beautiful dresses. This category of young women was more at risk because they arrived in a big busy city without knowing anyone and without having anywhere to live. Many times they ran the risk of even been murdered.

In the decade of 1870s a group of Greek educated women decided to take action in an effort to supply young domestic servants with schooling. Moreover, the founder and manager of the *Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, K. Parren, cared for them and wished to extend her activities more in offering help to these poor maids. In 1872, Kalliopi Kechagia, Helen Paparrigopoulou, Helen Skouze and Smaragda Vikela, along with sixty two ladies of charity, established a society in Athens for this purpose which ran under the auspices of Queen Olga. The society was called “The Ladies’ Society for female education” (Syllogos Kyrion yper tis Gynaikeias Paideuseos) and its purpose was the expansion of female education to nurses and to domestic servants (Tzanaki, Demetra, *ibid.*, 234). The ladies of the society raised funds from the Queen herself and also from wealthy Greeks who lived abroad. The society’s purpose was to supply poor young women with the basics in education while the school curriculum was also designed to teach them catechism and domestic crafts, as its main principle was firstly to make them virtuous persons and secondly to supply them with a skill which would help them earn their living (*Ibid.*, 235).

But despite the aforementioned efforts to provide young servants with the basic knowledge, the problem of maids’ illiteracy in the following decades became bigger as the influx of young peasant girls coming into the big cities in order to search for a placement, was higher. As a consequence, the duty of teaching the girls had to rest upon the shoulders of their mistresses who had also undertaken the task of their moral guidance (*Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, 1887, issue 10, 3). But in the wealthy households where young female servants were employed, the ladies were very demanding and harsh and not patient enough to teach them, while they often sent them back home if they were not happy with their service (Stamatoyannopoulou, Maria [[http://www.ergani.org.gr/document\\_library/get\\_file?](http://www.ergani.org.gr/document_library/get_file?)])

It is a well- known fact that illiteracy creates problems and breeds cor-

ruption in ethics. In one of Parren's articles in the *Ephemeris ton Kyrion* entitled "The maids in Paris and our female servants" (*Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1889, issue 11, 1-3) the writer compares and contrasts the female servants of the French capital city and also the maids of other European countries (see more in: Sarti, Raffaella, 2005, 3-59) to the Greek ones. She stresses the point- among others- that the French maids were efficiently skilled and had good manners. They also showed respect to their masters and loved their job and the family they worked for. By contrast, Greek women-servants were not hard-working and they claimed high wages. In cases when they had good employers who taught them skills in domestic arts, the only thing they did, was to search for another placement without previous notification when they felt that had learnt much, as they were ungrateful to their masters. Parren attributed their vice to illiteracy and to the lack of religious education which she considered to be one of the most important components of education. As a consequence, according to her views, the young illiterate servants were "immoral, cunning and impertinent. They liked gossip and spent a lot". In her concluding remarks Parren proposed the state to take action and supply them with the elementary education so as to improve their moral state.

Parren tried to help young female servants in many other ways. Through the columns of the *Ephemeris ton Kyrion* she proposed the establishment of an auxiliary fund for the maids. She considered it expedient as this fund could raise money and collect donations with which pensions could be given to those of the maids who served in the branch for a long time. It would also cater for their hospitalization. She believed that if the state undertook this initiative, it would help a lot in the maids' moral elevation (*Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, Athens, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1889, issue 141, 4). Eventually, the funding was set up by the National Bank of Greece and addressed to all servants and workers, a fact that Parren hailed as a great success (*Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1890, issue 186).

In 1892 she participated in another joint effort with other ladies of charity in establishing "Saint Catherine's Asylum for destitute women-workers" which provided poor girls with shelter and food until they found a placement. Kallirrohe Parren was appointed as the General Secretary. The asylum also addressed to those of the female servants that had been dismissed and they looked for another placement. Because it ran on very little funds, the young women had to pay a small sum of money for their short stay in it. In case when they could not afford, they paid it off

after they had found a job. Their stay in the asylum could not extend the period of two weeks, during which the ladies of the asylum tried to find them a placement (*Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1892, issue 286, 1-2). Moreover, those of the girls who were “industrious, virtuous and honest” were awarded by the charity ladies with medals, cash or a small monthly pension, in order to supplement their income (*ibid.*, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1894, issue 289, 1). The purpose of the asylum was to provide the girls with “practical knowledge” that could render them useful and competent in their new placement (*Ibid.*, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1894, 5-6). Textbooks were not used in the classes of the asylum while the knowledge supplied to them, was to learn how to be virtuous, dutiful and persons ready to fight for a better life (*ibid.*, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1898, issue 553, 2). By making these efforts Parren tried to elevate the maids’ moral state because she believed that high morality of female servants was important not only to them but also to the families they worked and lived in, as the young servants also helped in the rearing of the family’s children (*Ibid.*, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1893, issue 301, 6). Moreover, Saint Catherine’s Asylum was the “home and the family” of the girls (*Ibid.*, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1893, 1). So, literacy in this institution was supplied more as practical knowledge than theoretical.

By the end of nineteenth century it was common belief that schooling amidst working- women of the popular classes was a constant value that could enhance their level. This was a goal that the charity ladies were determined to achieve. Based on this premise, Parren announced the establishment of another school for female servants set up by the “Society for Destitute Women” (Syllogos Aporon Gynaikon) which was called “The School of Sunday” (1889). Its purpose was to supply young women-servants with the basic knowledge, such as reading, writing and arithmetic, along with religious education, which was “valuable equipment” for them. In one of her articles Parren made clear that the goal of the school was “to prevent bitterness from rooting in the children’s souls. [It also aimed] at teaching the future mothers of the Greek citizens and soldiers to respect God, to love each other, to be happy with what they own, to find happiness in their job, and also to be virtuous, brave, frugal, clean and moderate persons” (*Ibid.*, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1894, issue 348, 5).

The classes were given every Sunday from two until five in the afternoon and addressed to all maids. At the same time, they became very successful as they were fully attended by them. One year after its establishment, the registration was so high that the *Ephemeris ton Kyrion* informed its readers that those who had not been registered on time, could

attend classes as auditors only. One year later the school had two hundred students who formed different sections based on their level of competence (*Ibid.*, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1890, issue 162, 4). In this school, young girls under the age of ten were not accepted unless they were completely illiterate (*Ibid.*, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1890, issue 186,4). Literacy, morality and civilized manners were the basic principles taught to the girls who, at the same time, showed eagerness to learn (*ibid.*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1891, issue 206, 2 and 13<sup>th</sup> March 1894, issue 343, 4-5). In this school, there were no professional teachers to teach the classes but there were only the ladies of charity who did the teaching part. These women also tried to play more the role of mothers and to elevate the young girls' souls and offer them love and protection than to supply them with knowledge because the young students had left their parental home at a very young and tender age and they were at risk because of their ignorance. Likewise, the spirit and the way of teaching was different from those of the regular schools because in the School of Sunday there was not a fixed curriculum while the only textbook they used in the class was the spelling book (*Ibid.*, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1894, 4).

The general courses that the young girls took, were religious education, reading and writing, arithmetic, Greek history, and Home economics. All the above lessons targeted at giving them a "practical and constructive" knowledge according to Parren (*Ibid.*, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1890, issue 154, 3). The School of Sunday was modeled after the European ones and its final purpose was to educate young women to become virtuous mothers that would serve the nation in the best way by rearing good children (*Ibid.*, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1889, issue 138, 2).

But Parren was bitterly criticized for her initiative by part of the conservative press who believed that she "introduced novelties that would come out to be dangerous for the popular classes". Parren once more openly expressed her views through her paper by arguing that the girls in the School of Sunday were not taught only literacy but they also learnt how to have values and show high morality (*Ibid.*, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1894, issue 348, 4).

Parren, as aforementioned, was an active and restless person who never gave up her efforts for enhancing young servants' schooling. Her care this time was to make another joint effort in educating both poor maids with wealthy ladies in domestic skills. In 1896 she launched an initiative for the purpose, and set up a school called "Greek Women's Union School of Domestic Art and Vocation", (Salimba, Zeze, 2002, 227) the

supplied courses of which were designed to improve the skills of maids and also to better qualify their mistresses. Classes were given on domestic crafts such as tailoring, sewing linen, cooking, making artificial flowers, hat-making and painting. There were also courses of general knowledge such as religious education, reading and writing, arithmetic, history and home economics. Later on, the girls took French lessons as well (*Ephemeris ton Kyrion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1900, issue 627, 3). What must be noted in the school's curriculum is the fact that there were separate afternoon classes for the young servants and for the ladies. For example, the cooking courses for the ladies were given every Tuesday afternoon, while for the maids they were organized every Friday (*Ibid.*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1899, issue 586, 8).

### *Conclusions*

As female schooling in Greece was managed mainly by the private sector, women who had opportunities in education were very few and belonged to the elite, as their families could afford paying high fees. Consequently, the young girls of the popular classes were completely left in ignorance and, the worst of all, they were mothers of many children who were grown up as street arabs. From a very young age these children had to go out and work in order to bring money to their parents. The children of the popular classes were vulgar and rude and showed no respect as a result of their mothers' illiteracy. Moreover, the poor young girls had to move to big cities in order to work as maids. They often ran the risk of being raped or they received ill-treatment as there was no public care for the domestic servants. It was at the turn of the century when time was ripe for the elite ladies of charity to take on initiative and establish schools for young female workers and servants in order to teach them the basics in education. The School of Sunday was modeled after the European standards and aimed at instilling young maids with moral principles and values.

At the forefront of this effort stood Kallirrohe Parren and her newspaper *Ephemeris ton Kyrion*. Parren took part in a joint effort for educating the underprivileged young women. She also believed that both the State and the Church should be sensitive to the problem. In the absence of the above, women had to launch a campaign themselves in order to alert so-

ciety. Moreover, Parren focused her attention on the elite ladies for fund raising and for offering personal work because they were educated and could teach young girls the basics in knowledge. But the most important of all, were the values that the ladies of charity had to teach young women of the popular classes.

*Note*

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### *Abstract*

In late nineteenth century the upper social strata of the Greek society comprised of merchants, manufacturers, bankers and state functionaries, who projected themselves to the top rank. These persons had settled in Athens in the aforementioned period when the town acquired some of the characteristics of a major European city. An upper middle-class household required the employment of domestic servants in order to display its wealth and status. Working-class young girls were either factory-workers or domestic servants. Those who came from the islands usually became maids and entered domestic service at a very young age. Life was apt to be more demanding in the middle-class households they worked in, than they thought, while they often experienced cramped and impecunious living- conditions. Moreover, illiteracy among them was very high. By and large, social discrimination permeated the fabric of the Greek society in terms of female education. Among active feminists who advocated women's rights for access to knowledge was Kallirrhoe Parren, founder and manager of the feminist weekly entitled *Ephemeris ton Kyrion*

('Ladies' Journal) [1887]. Parren stressed the point -among others-that "female education of the popular classes was one of the most important assets for civilizing the Nation". In order to materialize her plans she participated in a joint effort of establishing a "School of Sunday" where women factory-workers and domestic servants received the basic schooling, such as reading and writing.

The purpose of this paper is to study the inequality of opportunities in education for young servant girls and also to prove that women's schooling was determined by class disparities. With the study of qualitative evidence we reinforce our view that the Greek girls of the popular classes lacked the opportunities in literacy, by contrast to the well-born young women who had access to higher studies.

Η Πόλλη Θαναηλάκη είναι διδάκτωρ νεότερης ιστορίας του Δημοκρίτειου Πανεπιστημίου Θράκης, και επισκέπτρια ερευνήτρια (visiting scholar) του Πανεπιστημίου Harvard των ΗΠΑ. Είναι συγγραφέας δύο βιβλίων και έχει δημοσιεύσει σημαντικό αριθμό επιστημονικών άρθρων σε έγκριτα ελληνικά και διεθνή επιστημονικά περιοδικά. Επίσης έχει κάνει ανακοινώσεις σε διεθνή επιστημονικά συνέδρια και έχει δώσει διαλέξεις σε πανεπιστήμια των ΗΠΑ και στην Ελλάδα. Τα ερευνητικά της ενδιαφέροντα εστιάζονται κυρίως σε θέματα Ιστορίας της Εκπαίδευσης και του Φύλου.

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