Women in ancient Greece

It is very difficult to determine the level of accuracy of much of the information we have about women in ancient Greece. A lot of the information we have about ancient Greece comes from stories and poems, and how reliable these sources were for the daily life of women cannot be checked. In general, most of our understanding of Greek women comes from Athens, because the majority of surviving material comes from there, so it is also hard to know how similar the lives of Athenian women were to the rest of Greece.

The position of women in ancient Greece differed between time, city and class. Women were generally not given a formal education. Although boys were sent off to school at an early age, girls were taught at home, and concentrated on domestic subjects; e.g., cooking, sewing, weaving and taking care of the family. If the family wished, they could teach their girls to read and write, or they could hire a tutor for the purpose; however, only wealthy families who had servants or slaves to take care of the domestic activities could afford to teach their daughters to read and write. Images of women reading and writing do exist, however, so it is certain that there were literate women. In fact, there are several great women poets who existed in ancient Greece, the most famous of which is the poet Sappho, who came from the island of Lesbos. She lived in a very early period of Greek history. Another woman who was known to be very well-educated and well-read was Aspasia, the girlfriend of Pericles. Although she lived in Athens, she was a foreigner, and there is very little information about literate Athenian women.

In a typical Greek house, there would have been a room dedicated to the activities of the women that was referred to as the gynaecium. Only women and children were allowed into this room—no men except the head of the household, the father or husband, would have been permitted to enter, and it would have been shameful for another man to see it. A woman was under the care of her father until she came of marriageable age, at which time she would move into her husband’s home. A woman could not run for public office or vote, though there are many references to women swaying their husband’s opinions. There were several religious posts that were reserved for women, including that of the pythia, the name of the oracle of Delphi. In Athens, many cults had priestesses, one of the most prominent being the priestess of Athena Polias, the patron goddess of the city. In general, in fact, all the female goddesses had priestesses.

In Sparta, the lives of women were very different. They lived separately from the men who grew up and lived most of their lives in barracks, training for warfare. Women took part in physical education, for it was believed by the Spartans that women who had strong bodies would produce strong men. Due to the fact that they ran their own households, Spartan women had more freedom then Athenian women, though the Spartan lifestyle still ensured that they were well disciplined. In Sparta, the warriors were the most important, and women were not permitted to join the army.
In ancient Greece, the life of a woman, and whether she would have freedom and be well educated, rested almost entirely with her father or guardian. If they deemed education a worthy cause, then a woman could become quite accomplished and be taught subjects similar to men, though it does not seem that this was often the case.