

WOMEN IN GREECE: FEMINIST GAINS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL EQUALITY*

Haris Livas

Cet article est le condensé d'un texte en trois parties "Feminist Gains," qu'Haris Livas a d'abord écrit pour l'Athens News Agency. Elle étudie les conséquences de l'élection, en 1983, d'un gouvernement socialiste sur la situation lamentable des femmes grecques, qui

existait auparavant, et scrute les lois en vigueur et les projets de loi (en particulier dans le domaine de l'emploi, du droit familial, de l'avortement et de l'enseignement). Elle signale aussi l'existence de nouveaux services sociaux comme les garderies d'enfants et les centres de planification familiale. Haris Livas mesure, d'autre part, l'apport des organismes fémi-

nistes et des ministères à la l'instauration de l'égalité véritable pour les femmes. La conclusion présente trois réalisations du mouvement progressiste : un centre pour les personnes âgées, une garderie et une usine de confection dont le personnel est exclusivement féminin.

I: LEGAL CHANGES

From 1830 when Greece was established as a modern independent state until 1983 when the Socialist Government came to power, women were considered second-class, second-rate citizens, subordinate to men in all spheres. Feminist demands for action had received only lip service from all previous governments and any attempts to initiate real changes in the way women were regarded had been sloughed off. Equality of the sexes had been established by the 1955 constitution, but nowhere did real equality exist.

When PASOK came to power, the position of Advisor to the Prime Minister on Women's Issues was created. The first and current holder of that post is Sue Antoniou, a lawyer by profession. Ms. Antoniou also chairs the seven-member Council of Equality whose job is huge – changing the mentality of the nation *vis-à-vis* women and implementing this change by recommending appropriate laws to the government. The Council works with a budget of 20 million drachmas this year; next year this is slated to rise. The Council not only recommends policy to the government and carries out its program of informing and enlightening the public, but also solves problems of discrimination reported by individuals or associations through collaboration with the appropriate Ministry. Sue's office is

always full, and she is an energetic fighter for those whose rights are threatened.

In line with the government's goal of decentralization, the first Councils of Equality were established in the summer of 1983 in the provinces. Eventually this system will spread throughout Greece so that problems can be handled on the local level. One major problem of education lies in persuading everyone that if we really want social justice we have to realize it's impossible without the liberation of women: social liberation and women's liberation go hand-in-hand. Passing laws is not enough. We have to ensure popular support for these new laws. And the passing of laws has to be complemented by a government willing to spend the money to change the social infrastructure so that it helps women. Of what use is it to a working mother to know that theoretically her child can attend a daycare center if such a center does not exist near her?

How far have we come? Women still get less pay for the same work and women continue to be obliged to stay home and take care of the non-productive members of society – children, invalids and the elderly. Women still are fired when they become pregnant or not hired in the first place if it seems that they are going to become pregnant. Women doing piece work, which is the basis of many a

business, are still exploited. Women owning businesses are only two percent and these are mostly family businesses, inherited from the father. Out of a total of three hundred members of Parliament, only twenty are women. There are officials – even ministers – who, as Sue says, "swallow equality like a pill they have to take."

This situation may look bleak – but I should turn a spotlight on the very real, revolutionary gains that have been made. Pensions for farm women are a recent victory. Women make up thirty-one percent of the total work force and of these forty-five percent are in agriculture. They work side-by-side with their husbands in the fields and then at home handle all the usual duties assigned to women – raising children, cooking, cleaning, sewing, etc. A twenty-four hour-a-day job. The husband at least takes some hours off to relax with the other husbands at the village *cafeneion*. And yet, when pension time came, only the man got a pension. If his wife was living, a little extra was added on for her, but this was granted in her husband's name. Now, for the first time, the farm woman has a pension *independent of her husband's, in her own name and in her own hands*.

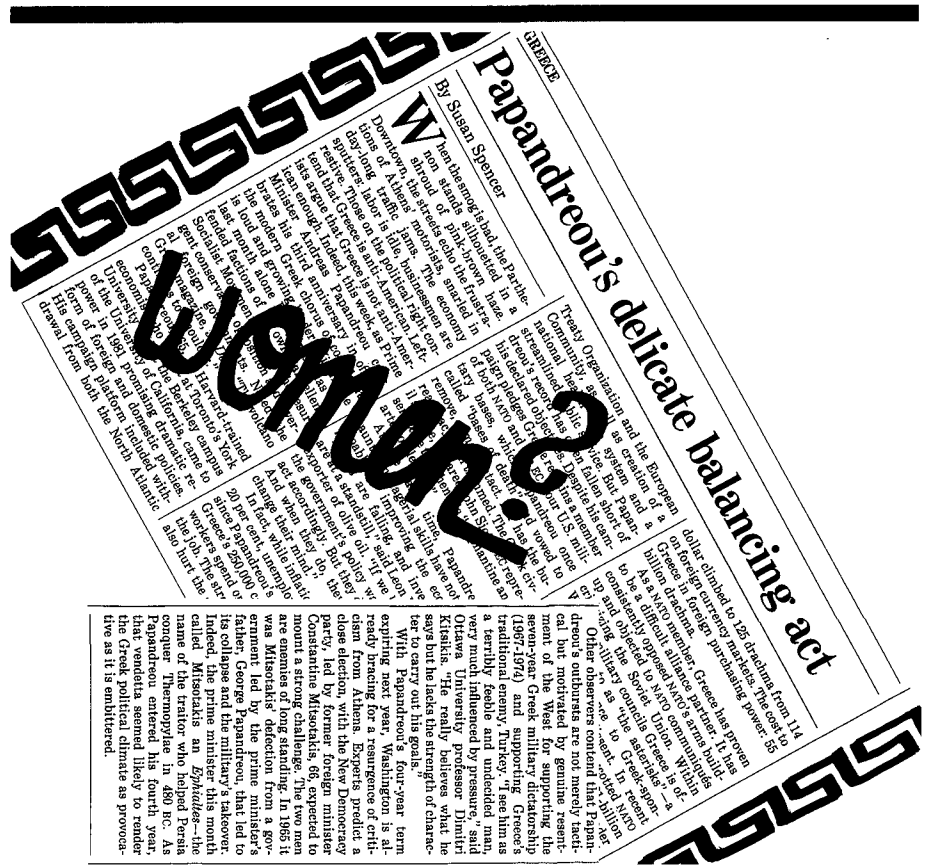
More gains: The Socialist-dominated Parliament passed the U.N. International

Conventions proscribing discrimination and protecting motherhood. These had not been even considered by previous Parliaments. A new Family Law was passed in March of 1983. In the past, a divorce was not possible without showing fault. A husband who could prove his wife's adultery by catching her in the act (to the great humiliation and embarrassment of all concerned) then could divorce her without paying alimony – even if he had driven his wife to adultery by his indifference and his total lack of recognition of her as a person. If the husband was the adulterer, the wife often did not even have the money to press charges, since by law the husband controlled the purse strings.

Among other things, the new Family Law abolished the dowry system whereby the woman was just another digit in a commercial transaction. (How many acres are you worth? How many apartments? How many flocks of sheep?) The Law also replaced the patriarchal family with a family run, by law, democratically by both the wife and husband. The woman doesn't even change her surname now, so her identity does not depend, even nominally, on her husband. When they get married the couple are *obliged* to state to the civil or religious authority conducting the marriage what surnames they will give to their children, which can be either the husband's or wife's or a combination of both. Civil marriage was established. Previously, if one was not married in the Greek Orthodox Church, the marriage was not considered valid and any resulting children were illegitimate. The coming of age for both sexes was reduced from twenty-one to eighteen, thus giving younger citizens the right to vote – a special encouragement to young women to become more involved politically in their country's destiny.

Divorce was made easier – and fairer! In the past the woman in a divorce case would often end up with *nothing* which had been acquired jointly by the couple during their marriage. Under the new law, she is entitled to at least one-third. Children born out of wedlock now have the same rights as 'legitimate' children, which is especially important in the case of inheritance. An unmarried mother also has priority for housing loans and taxation relief in buying her first home.

The laws for rape have been changed. Rape, although not a very common crime in Greece, still does occur. In the



past most of the perpetrators were unpunished due to the woman's hesitation to report the crime – a hesitation natural enough when most officials treated her shabbily and newspapers implied that she must have wanted it! Now it is up to the public prosecutor to start proceedings even if the woman has not declared the crime.

Another feminist gain has been in pushing a law now on its way through Parliament forbidding the exploitation of the human body in advertising. The law stresses "human body", but it was the *woman's* body that was being, as the Council puts it, "disgracefully and unacceptably exploited." Their studies showed that some eighty per cent of the advertisements in Greece displayed the nude female body.

In the field of education, the text books have been revised to avoid sexism. Methods for assuring equality in teacher-training programs are presented, and a Ministry of Education bill has already been passed abolishing such remnants of discrimination as the admission of women only to the Schools of Kindergarten Teachers and to the Faculty of Home Economics.

In the social services, 181 new day care centers have been established in the last

two years. A program of family-planning centers has been set up to provide information and practical help. Counselling centers have been set up to deal with family problems. On the labour front, whereas our Constitution stressed equal pay for equal work, there were no laws to back up this goal. Such a law, which also ensures equal opportunities to enter the labour market, is now in Parliament. A new law will also increase protection of motherhood on the labour scene and even provide leaves of absence for both father and mother when the baby is born.

New job opportunities are being created in fields previously virtually closed to women. For example, a promise has been won from the Urban Transport Organization to employ 150 women bus drivers who will receive special training from the Manpower Employment Office. In addition, to help solve the problem of youth unemployment, twenty thousand new positions, mainly in the service sector, will be created which will be subsidized by the Manpower Employment Office, subsidizing thirty percent of the new workers' salaries for employers who employ young women and only twenty percent to those who employ young men.

II: THE FIGHTERS

The Women's Organizations

In the vanguard of fighters for women's rights in Greece are the women's organizations. There are many: some are politically oriented; others, like the Greek Housewives Association (with eight hundred members representing the two million Greek housewives), are apolitical; some, like the Greek Women Scientists, are professional women's organizations fighting for special goals. Yet all are united behind goals, either Greek (such as the new Family Law or non-compulsory military service for women until full equality is reached) or international, such as the Peace Movement. And they are all working to make women aware of their rights, because without a change of *mentality* in Greece real equality is doomed.

Thirty-one percent of the Greek work force is now female, but that does not mean that these women are not housewives too. The Greek Housewives Association is not in existence to perpetuate the stereotypical domestic role. On the contrary, they would like their daughters to have careers and use their abilities outside the home. They see how easy it is to typecast a woman as the one responsible for all the child-rearing, cleaning, cooking, etc., and how hard it is to break the mold. They point wryly to a poem about a woman astronaut:

I'm off to the moon
With suitcase and travel kit
And naturally a broom
So I can attack dust and dirt
Because I'm a housewife
And like everything clean.

The biggest women's groups with political orientations are OGE and EGE. OGE, or the Confederation of Greek Women, was founded after the dictatorship with 128 members groups plus 50 cooperating groups. Although each member group has its own local goals, they all unite to fight for social and family equality, protection of motherhood, and equal rights in the work force. EGE, or the Union of Greek Women, has 15,000 members and characterizes itself as independent, feminist and socialist. EGE fights to change the status of women, but simultaneously to change society as a whole.

For these and the other women's groups the biggest job they have in the next few years is changing the Greek

mentality. There are, they say, some small changes that can already be discerned – in the way, for example, that young couples who are both employed outside the home share household duties – but these exemplars are rare: as they say, "Men don't give up their privileges easily." All the groups agree that the battle begins at home: "no matter how important our jobs are, we still have to keep thinking of what our husband and children are going to eat for dinner. And we have to fight a bad conscience if we don't prepare them anything."

The Mediterranean Women's Studies Institute puts the issues facing women in Greece in a wider context. They make studies followed by social policy recommendations and also publish books on the contributions of women. Their first research project has to do with women immigrants and their repatriation, and their first publication deals with Mediterranean Women in Liberation Movements.

The Ministries

The Ministries of Justice and of Health and Social Welfare have been carrying the ball in the fight for equality. George Mangakis, Minister of Justice, elaborated in a conversation on the laws discussed in Part I of this article, and on his Ministry's future plans. First of all, there will be a special court for family cases, with judges having special training and experience. Women judges will serve here, as they will throughout the system. Mangakis speculates that today only about one hundred out of two thousand judges are women; however, an examination for new judges was just concluded and, of those who will be placed, forty percent are women. Mangakis feels that will be a partial corrective for the system. "Just lately," he says, "we also have the first woman member of the Council of State and the first president of the Court of Appeals. We have no woman on the Supreme Court as yet, but we hope to have one soon – she's at the door!"

The Minister is concerned about the escalation of cases of gang rape in the past three or four years. He hopes the new rape law will be passed by Christmas. "Through it we intend to protect women. How? The prosecutor can now force a raped woman to come to court. The victim

does not have the right to refuse to go to court unless she can convince both the prosecutor and his immediate superior that the trial would be too great a psychological wound." To women who protest that this kind of trial would be dragging the victim's name through the mud, he replies, "We are trying to break the idea that the shame is the victim's. The shame is actually the rapist's." The draft law even foresees charges being pressed concerning forced sex *within* marriage, but the punishment is not as severe as it is for rape because somehow sex can be seen as "a duty and obligation of the marriage."

Homosexuality is not a crime in Greece unless it is performed with children, for money, or under pressure. Crimes of passion are severely dealt with by Greek courts unless there are mitigating circumstances. Mangakis describes one such case in which a young village man was led into homosexuality and subsequently murdered by his lover. His enraged father killed the lover – "and the court showed a special understanding."

A proposed new abortion law promises to legalize and subsidize abortions. Mangakis stresses that in the case of a married couple the consent of the husband will be required. Abortions can not be regarded as the best method of birth control, although in the past Greek doctors have not been truly supportive of family planning since abortions were so lucrative to them. In order to reduce their numbers, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, with the help of the U.N. and the W.H.O., has already started a network of Family Planning Centers to dispense both information and practical help. The Deputy Minister, gynecologist Maria Kypriotaki-Perraki, has been for years a strong fighter for family planning. Seminars are being given to train the personnel of the new centers which will be staffed by obstetricians, social workers, visiting nurses, and midwives. Family Planning Center doctors will not have the conflict of interest private doctors had, as they are employed by the hospital, not paid by the individual patient. Groups visited Hungary to see how the centers work there, and back in Greece meetings are held with the Women's Organizations to inform them of the existence of the centers. As there are always women who can't come to the center, the personnel fan out and make visits

to the surrounding areas. The center can also dispense or prescribe at cost whatever method each woman has chosen.

The Minister would also like the Family Planning Centers to provide prenatal care. Infant mortality in Greece is now seventeen percent, down from the twenty-two to twenty-five percent of a

few years ago. The percentage is still high due both to poor prenatal care and the fact that doctors able to handle emergencies are all located in the big cities. Many villages in Greece still have no doctors. The new National Health Scheme passed in August of 1983 by Parliament will distribute doctors all over

Greece. Doctors must now choose either to be members of the Scheme or to have private practices.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare collects only 8.87% of the total national budget, but the changes wrought by this Ministry have been, with the Socialists in power, far-reaching.

III: IDEAS INTO ACTION

I would like to conclude with an on-the-scene look at some advances for women in terms of centers for the elderly (an age group in which the problems of women are acute); the expanding daycare network for working mothers; and increased participation in the changing trade union movement.

The Agioi Anargeroi Center for the Elderly

In a new building with many rooms all the elderly of the area are gathered. They would normally be having coffee, playing backgammon, chatting. Instead they are waiting with an air of expectation for a visit from a group of foreign journalists. When we enter all these smiling people break into applause. We applaud back. Their welcome is fantastic.

This center represents a growing need in Greece. Under the Socialist government there are now seventy-four of them (thirty in Athens, the rest scattered throughout Greece); previously there were only six. Perhaps one might say they were not so needed in the past when the family unit in Greece was an extended one, embracing the old as well as the young. Taking care of the old people, if they needed care, was recognized as an obligation of the family. But times have changed. Here, as elsewhere, the nuclear family is taking over.

In order to reverse this alarming trend of depersonalizing human relations the Centres for the Elderly were established. Deputy Minister of Health and Welfare Maria Perraki explains that, for the old people who require continuous hospital care, there are state-run homes; for those who don't, these centers are meant to provide for their needs.

The Agioi Anargeroi Center is light and cheerful with plants and flowers everywhere. The Center provides occupational therapy, typing lessons, and various arts and crafts such as embroidery or sewing.

There are gymnastics, advice on diet and health problems, physical therapy, whirlpool baths. The doctor there tells me the emphasis is on preventive medicine; each member of the Agioi Anargeroi Center gets a complete annual check-up.

This center, like all such centers in Greece, is funded by four million drachmas a year from the Ministry. Sixty thousand of this goes each month for rent; the rest is used for salaries and the old people's activities. Members pay two hundred drachmas a year and are supposed to be over sixty, but the doctor tells me if someone forty-five came to them with nowhere else to go, they would take him/her. The Center provides cheap meals and coffee at ten drachmas a cup, but the director says, "If someone doesn't have the money, we don't ask him/her for it."

On the morning of our visit the mayor is there to greet us, as is the priest and all the women of the neighborhood who have seemingly been cooking for days to provide us with a banquet of so much food it is threatening to topple over the tables on which it is laid. I have never seen such smiling faces. They are all so proud of the Center and so pleased at our visit. One old lady tells me that many young people come to help out here, "so we don't feel cut off from the rest of society."

Life expectancy in Greece—seventy-one for males and seventy-four for females—is comparatively high. In 1950 the aged were ten percent of the population. By the year 2000 the number is expected to have more than doubled to twenty-one percent. The aging of the population is especially significant in the case of women. By 2000, women sixty years old and over are expected to account for more than twenty-three percent of the total females in the population. And by 2000 the number of those over eighty-five are expected to have doubled from 74.4 thousand in 1980 to 147.3 thousand in 2000.

Today many of those over eighty-five

are living alone. One statistic gives the picture: 23.8% of women eighty-five to eighty-nine live alone. When the aged do live at home, family relations are often strained because it is the woman of the household who is overburdened and restricted since the care of the elderly falls in her hands. And, unfortunately, as a U.N. report stated, for the vast majority of the aged throughout Greece "the wide spectrum of support devices common in other countries such as day-centers, meals on wheels, chiropody, and laundry services does not exist." The elderly in Greece are often illiterate, particularly the elderly women. Many of the aged are unable to read or write a letter, read the instructions on a bottle of medicine, or the sub-titles of the foreign films on Greek TV.

The Peristeri Daycare Center

Outside the building, which looks like a comfortable villa—and indeed once was—are six yellow buses which bring the children here. The villa has a backyard where a group of children under the supervision of three adults are singing and reciting poems. Upstairs is a nursery with a row of cribs for babies eight months and older and several large cheerful rooms with big picture-windows in which groups of children of different ages are playing. The walls are bright with the children's drawings and art projects. There's a tiny store so they can learn simple arithmetic in a play setting. The children are all clean and well-dressed; there is an abundance of personnel. But, this is not a center for all children of working mothers, only for those of civil servants. Here in Greece civil servants have managed to skim off the cream for years and accrue for themselves quite a stack of benefits that are not available to anyone else. The Peristeri Daycare Center is one example. Here eight month-old babies are accepted; in the ordinary state-run daycare centers children are not taken before age 2½, creating a big prob-

lem for the working mother who has nowhere to leave her child during the first years of his/her life unless it's with a grandparent or a paid baby sitter. There is no justification for the children of civil servants having privileges not available to the children of factory workers. The Ministry agrees: the system is slated for extension so that *all* children of *all* working mothers can receive the same quality of care.

The "Marisabel" Ready-Made Clothes Factory, N. Kiou, Pelyponneses

The factory called "Marisabel" is new. The floors are marble, the working spaces large and well-lit. Of its ninety employees, only six are male – they are in supervisory positions. It is the women who are cutting, sewing, stacking and folding. They all claim that they are satisfied with their jobs, which are varied in the sense that the factory makes a variety of clothes, so every day they are working on different items. Factory owner Angelos Theofsiadis gets credit from his employees for being "human." He has put in a company cafeteria for the work break where the

employees can get free coffee and simple foods like bread and cheese at cost. There are showers where the women can freshen up before they go home and a factory bus which takes them to the nearby town of Nauplion.

Some of the women belong to unions; others don't. The usual excuse for the low percentage of female membership is that they have no time or that their husbands object. The unionization of women and the inclusion of unions excluded from the General Confederation of Labour under previous governments are two primary goals of the reformation of the whole trade union movement in Greece. It is often claimed that the communist unions were the ones excluded, but the truth is that any union the Confederation thought it couldn't control was left out.

The only woman on the Executive Council, Lilika Vasilakos from the Nurses Union, has traveled throughout Greece studying women's issues – which are also receiving academic attention from the Research and Training Branch of the Confederation. The Confederation supports equal pay for equal work; the protection of motherhood; increased opportunities for

the advancement of women workers; no sex requirements for any job; and more programs to train skilled women workers. President of the Executive Committee Yannis Papamichael says, "For a long time women were considered 'poor' members of the work force, and this belief kept them out of the trade unions. Also employers encouraged them not to join. We believe that with the new organization of the trade union movement, the number of women involved will double." Because women make up thirty-one percent of the work force and only two to three percent of them are in trade unions, even this figure cannot be considered optimum.

*This article is a condensation by the editors of CWS/cf of a three-part series "Feminist Gains" Haris Livas originally wrote for the Athens News Agency (ANA). We are grateful to both the author and ANA for their permission to use this material.

A long-time fighter for women's rights, Haris Livas is a feature writer for the Athens News Agency.

SONG OF THE MOSS

I sing the miracle
girlchild awakening
fiddlehead under rock fall
all future furred away
in a green medallion
only the moss can wear

Look now
rapidly unfolding
head shape and cheek curve
delicate toughness of shoulder
ribcage of balalaika or guitar
arms air strumming
legs rhythmical, feet drumming
and all the body lightly furred
the innocent bruise
at elbow, knee and thigh

How cold the left of me
heart sinking and shrinking
arms open, the child already far
and I sorrowing, knowing
her journey from mossbank
never unfurls of its own
but answers to the world's
irrevocable metronome

She will learn soft
and brutal dances
before she is carried home

Frances Davis
Montreal, Quebec