



Cultures of femininity and female identities in the Greek context: adolescence memories of women from two generations

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Introduction

According to the contemporary gender theory:

- individuals are considered to be “gendered subjects” who always make choices and act according to specific prerequisites dictated by the social category of gender.

According to recent research on gender identities

- Emerging changes are observed in the way the dominant characteristics of male and female identities are understood, with a strong tendency towards the broadening of their content, together with a variety of contradictory discourses.
- Changes are pin-pointed mainly in relation to female identities whereas, at the same time,
- traditional social regulations concerning female sexuality still remain powerful.

Introduction

The Greek context:

- Important changes in the legislation, aiming at gender equality, during the last 40 years
- Greater flexibility in the way the social environment understands the female identity in relation to the male, in the sense that the constructions of femininity are not as rigid and stable as they used to be in the past.
- Social transformations are connected with and promoted by the female gender.
- However, it seems that existing traditional values and beliefs result to a contradictory picture of the Greek society:
 - changes are not easily accepted, especially those that imply the deconstruction of gender dualisms. Therefore,
 - Ideologies remaining attached to traditional patterns of gender relations are often detected.



Aims

- To contribute in better understanding the changes that have occurred in adolescent gender identities during the last four decades.
- To discuss the ways dominant discourses and ideologies on gender are shaped in the Greek context over a time of forty years
- To focus on the changing aspects of femininity and trying to show off the discourses used by women of different ages, who recall memories of their adolescence and talk about themselves and the other young girls of their time.

Research Questions

- What are the typical discourses used by contemporary women of different ages who talk about the time of their adolescence?
- Are these constructions similar or differ from age to age?
- Can we talk about “changing functions of femininity”?
- What has changed and what remains stable regarding female identities in the Greek context?

The research: The sample

Table 1: The Students

	Age	Studies	Place she grew up	Father's Occupation	Mother's Occupation
1.	20	English Literature	Urban	Civil Engineer	English language teacher
2.	21	Psychology	Suburban	Merchant	Merchant
3.	20,5	Physical Education	Suburban	Public Sector Employee	Aesthetician
4.	21	History and Archaeology	Urban	Lawyer	Lawyer
5.	20	Fine Arts	Urban	Specialized Technician	Employee
6.	23	Economics	Urban	Merchant	Helping in the family business
7.	20	Physical Education	Urban	Merchant	Public Sector Employee
8.	19	Science	Urban	Retired	Nursery carer
9.	21	Educational Studies	Suburban	Small business owner	Public Sector Employee



The Research: The Sample

Table 2: The Mature Women

	Age	Occupation	Place of living	Father's occupation	Mother's Occupation
1.	60	English Language Teacher	Urban	Public Sector Employee	Housewife
2.	57	Housewife	Suburban	Migrant worker in Germany	Migrant worker
3.	64	Domestic Science Teacher	Suburban	Free Lancer	Housewife
4.	61	Small Business Owner	Urban	Small Business Owner	Small Business Owner
5.	56	Kindergarten Teacher	Suburban	Manual Worker	Manual Worker
6.	62	Primary School Teacher	Suburban	Farmer	Farmer
7.	60	Employee	Suburban	Farmer	Farmer
8.	59	Housewife	Suburban	Farmer	Farmer
9.	60	Secondary Education Teacher	Suburban	Farmer	Farmer
10.	62	Housewife	Suburban	Farmer	Farmer



The Research: The Process

Participants were asked

- to describe their experience of growing up as young girls in the family and the school context,
- to give their own meanings of adolescent femininity and of the model of the 'good girl' of their time and
- to talk about their parents' and teachers' expectations regarding their own future as women.

Results

Four interpretive repertoires arose from the analysis:

- the repertoire of female purity,
- the repertoire of traditional femininity
- the repertoire of gender equality
- the repertoire of male superiority.

The repertoire of women's purity

The main points:

- Connecting femininity with the notion of girl's "honor" and, by extension with the notion of the honor of the family

"They valued girls' honor very much, that girls should not have any relations with boys, otherwise they would not be considered as belonging to decent families"

57 years old, housewife

- Restricting girls through the imposition of rules and prohibitions, as to avoid relationships with the other sex and thus to control sexuality

"...it was around the end of the 60's... we were imposed a specific time schedule, we had to be back home before dark..."

60 years old, secondary school teacher



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The repertoire of women's purity

The main points:

- Subjugation to patriarchal rules and norms, in the frame of which all women are constructed as being at the mercy of the father-master.

“Dad was very strict, he always said to my mom ‘if the little one (i.e the interviewee) does something wrong, I will first kill you and then I will kill her’... it was forbidden to talk to boys...”

62 years old, primary school teacher

The repertoire of women's purity

- Despite the forty years that separate the two groups of participants, the same repertoire is adopted also by the younger women:

“... and something else (...) young girls’ relationships with boys should be very careful (...) being friendly would be ok, but nothing more... a girl can not enjoy as much freedom as her brothers in the family, she has much more responsibilities in the house and, in general, she must be very careful, her behavior has to be very correct (...) and, to sum up, a boy is better accepted, whereas a girl is required to behave”

20 years old, student of Fine Arts



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The repertoire of traditional femininity

The main points:

- Marriage, as the dominant destination and, especially for the older interviewees, the lack of any life prospect that would not include creating a family and becoming a mother

Q. "What did your parents expect from you?"

"Nothing. To come to an age and get married to a good guy, and that's all. They didn't expect anything else... I had a wish to be trained to become hairdresser, but they didn't allow, I should have to leave the village and go to live to the city, which was forbidden. They believed I would get a boyfriend there.

62 years old, housewife



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The repertoire of traditional femininity

The main points:

- The traditional role division in the family and the obligatory girls' contribution to the household.

“She was asking me to wash even my brother’s shirts (...) because the woman (her mother) didn’t have the time... I started slowly from a small age, when I was twelve, to cook spaghetti, fresh dinner every evening for them to find when they came back from the fields. I participated in all household chores and later, when I was sixteen, when my father was ill and my mom had to take care of him, I had a lot of work at home”.

60 years old, Secondary Education teacher

The repertoire of traditional femininity

The main points:

- The asymmetrical relations of brothers and sisters, in the frame of which young girls serve their brothers in a circle of care and submission.

“My brothers expected from me to keep their clothes well-ironed and their shoes cleaned. Me or my sisters should offer to them whatever they needed, even a glass of water. When they came back from their work, everything should be ready, the table served...”

60 years old, employee



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The repertoire of traditional femininity

- With younger girls being expected to offer psychological support:

“My brother wanted me to support him, when he had a problem or conflicts with my parents, to mediate, in order to calm things down”.

21 one years old, Psychology student

“ I was and I still am a kind of psychological support for my family and perhaps not as evident as that. I make them laugh, I give them advice according to what I think is right and my contribution, if not tangible, is psychological for sure”

21 years old, History and Archaeology student

The repertoire of traditional femininity

The main points:

- The emphasis on the different gender socialization in the family and on the conflicts with the parents

“In my family the sex of the child was not very important... socialization, however, in gender roles was different for boys and girls”

23 years old, student of Economics

“The fact that I didn’t want to contribute to the household was a problem, however things were not as difficult as that, maybe because I followed another path, that of studies and education...”

21 years old, student of Educational Science



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The repertoire of traditional femininity

The main points:

- Including studies as an expectation for girls

“My parents, because they were poor, believed that only education could offer a chance for progress... at my time studies meant finding a good job”.

62 years old, primary school teacher

“The only thing that was important was to study and to be good at school”

19 years old, Science student

The repertoire of gender equality

The main points

- The emphasis on the notion of equity between women and men, focusing mainly in the public sphere

“I believe that girls were raised in the same way as the boys. That is there was not any discrimination because of their gender, they were not denied things like for instance education, hobbies, freedom, anything. Everything was the same as for the boys... my parents expected from me the same things they expected from my brother, that is to finish our education and achieve as much as we could”

20 years old, English Literature student



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The repertoire of gender equality

The main points:

- The finding of change in women's lives, especially when comparing the contemporary reality to what happened before

"I think that my generation is the one that has experienced some changes, the changes we are talking about the last years, regarding the position of boys and girls in the family".

21 years old, History and Archaeology student



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The repertoire of difference or of male superiority

The main points:

- Families' wish for a boy,
- The fact that girls were considered to be either useless for the family, or a burden

"At my time, most of the families, I believe, wished to have boys. Because boys would continue the family name and because they offered manual work in the fields. Additionally, parents did not have to worry about them, as they worried for their daughters, concerning their future marriage. That is, if and when they would get married. Regarding us, however, we did not have any problem in our family. It is true that we did not have a brother to be able to compare their behavior, but they had never shown us that they preferred a boy from a girl. "

62 years old, Prim. School teacher



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The repertoire of difference or of male superiority

- Only three out of 9 young women adopted the same repertoire, even using the same arguments

“My father preferred to have a boy, because, at that time there were these stereotypes that still exist, that the first child of the family should be a boy, in order to continue the name of the family and to support the family financially by his work”

21 years old, student of Physical Education



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Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of the interviews of two generations of women,

- Highlighted the existing discourses of female identity in the contemporary social context. These discourses have proven to be
 - fluid and keeping intact most of the traditional elements,
 - identifying the notions of femininity and of gender equality through education, career, politics and gender division of labour, but not through sexuality and the aspects connected with the private sphere and personal life



Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis showed

- the changing aspects of female identity, the construction of which
 - uses the discourses of equality,
 - ignores the dominant gender dualisms and focuses on innovative aspects.
- the richness and the multiplicity that characterize the contemporary adolescent female identities that are constructed in the basis of a variety of elements, roles and behaviours:
 - caring, but also academic success,
 - domestic work, but also offering psychological support to the members of the family.

Discussion and Conclusions

- It seems that the construction of femininity is structured in the frame of contradictory gender discourses. As it has become evident, the two repertoires the one of “gender equality” and the one of “traditional femininity” used together by the younger women, are in contradiction with each other.

Discussion and Conclusions

- Young women face a strong dilemma, as they grew up in a transitional period, in which two dominant discourses are in conflict:
 - On the one hand, there is the discourse of gender equality and on the other the discourse of inequality, of male superiority or of traditional femininity.
- For contemporary women, however, an alternative discourse is in use, the discourse of equality, to which they can identify and pursue changes in their lives and in their context.
- As the repertoire of male superiority is gradually being replaced by the repertoire of gender equality, further research is needed concerning if and how it permeates the discourses of wider social groups.