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# **The woman of Epirus of domestic and non-domestic labour**

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**T.E.I. of EPIRUS**





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## **Introduction**

The current study focuses on the diachronic participation of the woman of Epirus, paid or not, in the financial life of the area. Our goal is to present the activities which constitute the particular features of the woman of Epirus of domestic and non-domestic labour, which have rendered her the paradigm of diligence and vigour.

A result and extension of their social role above all, the activities of Epirus women have been determined through time by the particular geographical, morphological, climatic and historical conditions which formed the particular identity of Epirus, a unique character, differentiating it from the rest of Greece.

## **A few words about the identity of Epirus**

Populated for more than 60.000 years, according to discoveries of archaeologists and paleontologists, Epirus constitutes a region of contradictions and rich history. The terrain combines huge mountainous ridges - once covered with dense forests but today stripped of them - which render most of the land barren and a long coastline on the west, which offers direct access to the Ionian Sea, Italy and the rest of Europe. Climate presents significant differentiations between the mountainous regions and the coastal areas of low altitude: mainland climate, with cold winters, rain and snowfall in the first case, and mediterranean, mild climate, with increase humidity and hot summers in the second.

Thus, the particular features of Epirus determined financial life of the area from ancient to modern times. The result of this was the performance and specialisation of local people in crops and professions which initially offered them a living and later on the commercialization of their products [1a]. Fishing, stock-farming (nomadic mainly), and agriculture have always been the main financial activities of the people of Epirus.

From ancient times, women participated actively in the productive process and generally constituted important factors of family and community life [2]. Their financial activities have always been the result and extension of their social role, as it was determined by the society of each time, and the role that the class they belonged to entailed. Because, apart from the dominant and widespread patriarchal structure of societies (both locally and internationally), which at the same time meant the "deprivation" and complete absence of female rights both in ancient and Byzantine times, the class variation of each time's society, which imposed its own, sometimes particular rules, also played an important role. So, for example, there were activities "forbidden" to women of higher status, such as agriculture or working for another person, and others, common for all women, regardless of their social status, such as weaving.

### **The woman of Epirus and the loom: a relationship that lasts for centuries. From domestic to non-domestic small industries**

Weaving has been an integral part of women's life since ancient times. As a means of providing the necessary for the family, it has been one of the first kinds of craft in human history.

When we refer to ancient women, the image we have in our mind is that of the women of Homer. Mortal<sup>1</sup> or Goddesses<sup>2</sup>, in the world of Homer, women retreat to their loom, their "fabric", and weave, alone or with other women. This image is quite close to what happened in ancient Epirus too.

Archaeological findings, which in any case constitute the most valid source of information, allowing us to recreate a relatively objective picture of the everyday life of our distant ancestors, including the activities of women, verify the fact that Homer's narrations are not the result of his poetic imagination but the truth. So, in ancient times, female activities were confined in the restricted area of their house. The women's quarters, the room of female activity, a special, secluded place in the upper floor of houses, was a standard in ancient Greece and it was *the most carefree area of their own activity*<sup>3</sup>. There, women occupied themselves with weaving, spinning and embroidery. These seem to have been their main occupations, mainly an extension of the social role of their sex, according to which women were responsible for the housework and anything that had to do with their home in general. Especially in the region of Epirus, the rich findings that archaeological excavations reveal daily verify and reconstruct ancient reality. As it was pointed out by archaeologist Anthi Aggeli, weaving weights, agnithes<sup>4</sup> and depictions on pots, which are daily revealed by archaeological excavations in most houses of the area where ancient Amvrakia used to be, prove the amplitude of these activities, which are classified in the field of domestic industry. Home efficiency constituted one of the ideals of that time and women had their own contribution to it by setting up their own "small industries" within the place they lived in.

In the years that followed, the sources of information that had to do with people's everyday life, including women's, became less in Epirus. Male activity, and especially of those men who played a leading role in the developments of a society full of unrest and despots, left little room for meager references to issues of daily routine. Quite often, in particular, sources present an image that has little to do with reality, since, according to Professor Aggeliki Laiou [3], in Byzantium there is a disharmony between ideology and reality, which was particularly evident in issues that had to do with the participation of women in financial activities such as agriculture, industry, and commerce. According to Byzantine ideology, women possessed an honourable position within the family and they were allowed to occupy themselves only with the housework. Within this framework of housework, their occupation included spinning, weaving, and making of clothes, in order to cater only for the needs of the family. This was their main and the only totally accepted financial activity within the Byzantine Empire. However, it seems that in reality things were different. When it comes to survival, women sell the products of their work on the loom. Concerning the Despotate of Epirus in particular, there is the

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<sup>1</sup> Penelope (see Homer's "Odyssey" a 356kk, b 94-105 etc) and the women in the island of Feakes (modern Corfu) (see h 95-111) are the most striking examples.

<sup>2</sup> For example Calypso (see e 62) and Kirk (k 222-223)

<sup>3</sup> Olga Komninou - Kakridi: The Plan and the Technique of Odyssey. ESTIA, Athens 1984, p. 51

<sup>4</sup> The clay agnithes of the loom were weights that held the vertical threads of the loom taut.

account of Ioannis Apokafkos<sup>5</sup> to prove it. He informs us that a woman was granted divorce, because her husband had left her and so she had to weave and make clothes for other people.



**Loom**  
(from the collection of the Folklore Museum of Rodavgi in Arta)



**Distaff**  
(from the collection of the Folklore Museum of Rodavgi in Arta)



**Loom**  
(from the collection of the Folklore Museum of Peta in Arta)

### Loom and distaff: the alter ego of the woman of Epirus

During the Ottoman Domination, the prevalent conditions in the area favour the development of nomadic stock-farming [1b], which means that herds as well as their owners had to move constantly. Women followed their husbands and the herds, helped in all kinds of tasks and weaved. They weaved clothes and rugs, using the wool that their livestock produced.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century and on, the domestic weaving craft of the stock-breeders of Epirus was organized as a professional activity with significant exports [1c]. Especially in the mountainous regions of Epirus, stock farming was so prosperous that it produced plenty of feedstock for the production of textiles. The textiles produced in this period were used both to cater for the needs of people as well as their houses. Women from Epirus pored over the craft of weaving from an early age and combining imagination with patience and persistence, features that characterize women of Epirus, created original and greatly prized textiles.

Panagiotis Aravantinos [4], referring to women of Ioannina and their occupations in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century points out: "*women of lower status were and*

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<sup>5</sup> A prominent law scholar of the Despotate of Epirus in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. "*His law texts constitute significant sources of the social and trial history of his era, while they are distinguished for their objectivity and their humorous depiction of daily life and folk culture of the time.*" (Donald M. Nicol) [1]

still are skillful in sewing and embroidering crafts, which are used in the area or in the provinces. Few women occupy themselves with weaving, while they have started dealing with silk-weaving, making products of high quality which are used by local people, since among all ornamental products used by the families in Ioannina silk clothes are the most important". Three decades later, Seraphim Xenopoulos [5] refers to the women of Arta: "women of lower status, being diligent, are very skillful in sewing and embroidering, occupying themselves with weaving too, and village women, in particular, have already occupied themselves with silk-weaving too.". Through this accounts, a kind of social variation becomes evident. Epirus women of lower social status seem to be the ones mostly occupied with the craft of weaving as a means of making a living.



**Women of Arta were experts in embroidery and sewing**  
(photos from the collection of the Folklore Museum of Peta in Arta)

Most houses had a loom in them and young girls spent most of their day there.

*Young girl, sitting on the loom and weaving all day,  
Withering young men,  
Weaving silk and nice, colourful ornamental clothes,  
My new love,  
Why don't you look outside to see who's passing by  
And tenderly looks at you.<sup>6</sup>*

During the difficult years of German Occupation, handicraft, woven clothes made with sweat on the loom by women of Epirus, in many cases guaranteed a living to whole families. "You could see women loaded with heavy clothes (rugs, blankets), roaming the villages of the plain in order to sell them and buy a little corn or a bottle of olive oil." [7]

When work on the loom got out of the narrow limits of domestic craft and was used professionally, as a means of livelihood for the family, it became more tiring, arduous and demanding. Time, changing conditions and the industrialization of

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<sup>6</sup> Part of a popular regional song [6], which presents a very common picture of that time in a very descriptive way. Art verifies the relationship between women and the loom. Epic poetry in ancient times, paintings of the Middle Ages, and popular songs of recent times, reveal in their own particular way the daily routine of each time.



production, lead to the foundation of schools (state or private) of weaving, handicraft, housekeeping and carpet-making in Epirus, which trained young girls in arts that began to lose their prior appeal and prestige.

In order to *preserve the long lived, but threatened, tradition of carpet-making and at the same time offer a supplement to the income of rural families*<sup>7</sup>, carpet-making schools are founded under the auspice of the state organization EOMMEX (Hellenic Organisation of Small Medium Sized Enterprises and Handicraft), initially in Delvinaki in Ioannina in 1964, and Megalochari in Arta. Since then, many villages in Epirus acquired schools which immediately guaranteed to women an income, much needed for the survival of rural families of Epirus. After a thriving period they began to decline and there are only a few left today. The number of women working in these schools is declining day by day. *“The only thing that female weavers remind of is “The fire-bugs” of Pasolini, which had been shedding their light since the beginning of world before they disappeared from neighbouring Italy a few decades ago, due to environmental pollution. Something like that happens in our country too, to those working in the traditional sectors of productive economy, such as textile industry, carpet industry and silk industry. Not long ago, they also used to shed light on the roads of wool, cotton, silk and civilization, before they began to disappear” [8].*



**Just like the fire-bugs of Pasolini, the workers in the carpet industry of Filippiada in Preveza still lead the way in the wool industry.**

Nowadays, only necessity is what women of Epirus do in the few remaining active looms of the area. Nevertheless, handmade works of art of Epirus women have been passed on from generation to generation, bequeathed by great grandmothers, grandmothers, or even mothers, and are treasured as invaluable objects in most houses in Epirus. Meanwhile, the women of Epirus who have associated their lives

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<sup>7</sup> Oral account by Mrs Sophia Paparouna and Mrs Georgia Sionti who are in charge of the Carpet-making Schools of Kerasonas and Filippiada in Preveza, respectively, in 24-8-- 2007.

with the loom become a paradigm for young girls even though this may sound unreal. Two young girls who abandoned their studies in order to come to the village of Ano Pedina in Ioannina and learn the craft of the loom in the Lambriadio School of Housekeeping are a striking example. We had read about them<sup>8</sup> and went to Ano Pedina in order to meet them but that was unable since they were at their work. However, we spoke to Mrs Sotiria Tsigara. She and her husband own the restaurant "Sotiria", right next to the girls' house. "*They do everything...They dig, clean houses, wash, sew, weave...They work all the time...They do whatever all village women do*". Their life starts with the first light in the morning and they do everything, just like all typical women of Epirus.

### **Women of the countryside of Epirus, paradigms of vigour and diligence**

So, contrary to the common belief for centuries, according to which the only acceptable occupations for women were those related to family and housework, the financial activities of Epirus women were not restricted to the private space of their house. From early times, the women of Epirus got into a variety of non-domestic occupations. Agriculture and stock-farming has been probably the most important field of their non-domestic activity since Byzantine times.

Apokafkos [3] refers to two cases of women who worked in the fields, an occupation which very rarely appears in sources. In the first case, it is mentioned that women were harvesting grapes together with male workers, while in the second, that they were in part responsible for the harvesting of crops since there were few men left due to war. No woman of higher status is mentioned in relation to such financial activities.<sup>9</sup> The only case that we come across such an account is quite particular: in the biography of Queen Theodora, and later on Patroness Saint of Arta, by Job, it is mentioned that Theodora, persecuted by her husband, had been wandering for years, initially with her unborn son within her and later on bearing him in her arms, until one day a priest found her while she was gathering wild herbs in order to survive [10].

During the Ottoman Domination, adverse conditions form a new model of woman in rural Epirus: as the ones who deal with the housework and the needs of the family, Epirus women participate equally with men in all tasks which guarantee the survival of the family, or, if there's a lack of men in the battlefield, they become their substitutes, without ever neglecting the responsibilities that their place in the family entails. So, apart from raising her children, doing the housework, weaving her family's clothing, the woman of Epirus occupied herself with fields and gardens, took care of their livestock, and participated actively in all agricultural and stock-farming activities, depending on the needs of the family. Referring to women of Souli, F. Pouqueville mentions that they lack the external features of the women of Thesprotia, because they suffer from the depressing farming tasks [11].

The liberation of Epirus from the Turks did not change things much. Women continue to participate in all activities that ensure the survival of their family. In the new sufferings that World War II, the Civil war, and the huge immigration wave in the decades that followed had in store, the woman of Epirus was the mainstay of her family. During the difficult years of German Occupation, *herds of women roamed the fields gathering herbs* [12] to keep their families alive. *We had been working all our life,*

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<sup>8</sup> Panos Bailis: *Weaving the plot of their life*, Eleftheros Typos newspaper, 12 January 2008

<sup>9</sup> According to Professor Helen Angelomatis - Tsougarakis, the absence of such accounts could be completely *circumstantial*.

until we died, said Maria Zikou<sup>10</sup>, who started working at ten in rice fields, cotton fields, citrus fruit fields and any other kind of farming work (photo 7), helping her parents initially and her husband later. *“There was a lot of poverty then... and even little children worked.”* .... That was, the fate of the women of Epirus for quite a few decades. *“We left (home) at 7 (in the morning) and came back in the evening... We came home to do the washing with lye, to make corn bread and also to cook vegetable marrows for the children to eat...”*. Having lived between plains and mountainous areas of Epirus, she became witness of a peculiar situation that differentiated women’s lives in each place: *“Only women worked here, here in the plains only women, in the mountains men worked as well. In the plains only women: with the sheep? women; in the fields? women; in the house? women... Down here in the plains, women had babushkas and always sang and dug the ground. And the sun was really hot...”*.



**Women of Epirus countryside officiate in agricultural labour.**  
(photo from the collection of the Folklore Museum of Peta in Arta)

The last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about significant changes in the lives of the people in Epirus. The strong emigration wave of people living in mountainous areas to semi-mountainous or lowland areas and their accumulation in urban and semi-urban districts, led to the partial urbanization of a basically rural society. Women of Epirus living away from the urban centers still keep the basic characteristics of the woman of the past, integrating, however, in her character those imposed by circumstances too. In this way, the farmer-businesswoman turns up – a relatively new phenomenon.

The agricultural co-operatives of women that emerge in different villages of Epirus constitute a new form of the local woman’s involvement in the financial life of the area. Their main activities are: alteration, stylization and trading of traditional,

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<sup>10</sup> Personal account, Kalovatos, Arta, 9-7-2007

quality products. The Agricultural Handicraft Co-op of the women of Peta, the Agricultural Co-op of the women of Vigla in the prefecture of Arta, the Women's Agricultural Co-op of Thesprotiko in the prefecture of Preveza, and the Women's Epirotic Co-op in Katsika in the prefecture of Ioannina are some of the most enterprising in the area. *"Women's Agricultural Co-ops constitute a living element of the Greek district and play an important role in supporting rural families and local society. The presence and contribution of countryside women... acquires a dynamic role in the development of Greek agriculture. She is a pioneer in the effort to produce and merchandise quality products and contributes to the transmission of tradition at the same time..."*<sup>11</sup>

The women's associations that are founded in different parts of Epirus aiming to improve women's life are also towards the same direction. *Women's associations are grounds in which a woman offers the most for the development of her land [13]*. The Association of women of Rodavgi in Arta, for example, is one of the relatively recently founded associations aiming at the improvement of women's life in the massif. Members of the Association deal with agriculture, stock-farming and handicraft; in other words, they are producers continuing their traditional role set by local society, but also are active traders of their products in the market, thus extending their activities to fields that are not within the limited ends of the past.

### **In conclusion**

In recent years, developments in every aspect of life in Epirus have been accelerated. Women of Epirus go with the stream and assert their authority in the field of production *gaining distinction in fields in which their performance is equal to that of men [13]* by greatly contributing to the financial growth of the area and the support and bond of the family. The past, which was full of contradictions, gives place to the present that allows women more and more to decide on the fields of their domestic and non-domestic activity, where they can exhaust their bequeathed energy by giving it new features in the light of the changes that take place. Thus, the new model of the Epirus woman is formed; a combination of elements established by her lengthy and full of contrasts presence and action in the area on the one hand and by her need to evolve and absorb anything new on the other.

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from a statement on 18-5-2005 of the under-Secretary (now Secretary) of Rural Development and Food, mr. Alexandros Kontos.



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