



The position of women in Corfu as demonstrated in the notarial registers during the last century of the Venetian period

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## ABSTRACT

*The economic changes that took place in Europe, along with other factors such as the reduction of the male population due to war conflicts, created the right conditions for the emergence of women's activity. The position of women, although still subject to certain restrictions, improved considerably. Women are now presented as self-reliant in numerous contracts of an economic nature. Apart from this, they gradually seem to carry out other types of activities, such as artistic activities, engaging in charity, and intellectual cultivation.*

**Keywords:** women, notarial deeds, Ionian Islands, venetian period

## Introduction

Major economic changes took place in Europe from the 13th century onwards. In particular, the development of agriculture and trade growth resulted in the gradual creation of urban centers and an increase in population. In addition to this, the intensification of warfare reduced the male population, which encouraged women to become active in various fields. All the above changes laid the foundations for many social changes that gradually took place. In the present study, reference will be made to women in the 17th-century society in the area of the Ionian Islands, particularly Corfu, focusing on the ways and strategies she adopted at the socio-economic level.

Before analyzing women's activity in the period under consideration, it is necessary to address some specific aspects of women's presence, to approach the issue more comprehensively. As is well known, the 'options' a woman had when leaving the family were quite limited. These restrictions can be more easily understood, considering that in the period at issue two of the main occasions that served a woman's socialization were participation in religious festivals and church attendance on Sundays (Hufton, 2003).

Moreover, on occasions when a woman did not intend to marry, to escape the social pressures, they would often opt for monastic life. This was because nuns often played an active role, both inside and outside the monastery, always observing, of course, the ecclesiastical rules. One of the activities they could engage in within the monastery was the writing of texts, which usually concerned subjects related to the monastery (chronicles, biographies of the founders, lives of the Saints, and meditations on religion). More rarely, some of the nuns are reported to have been composing music (a representative example is that of a monastery in Bologna, where high-quality music education was provided) or to have undertaken the organization of theatrical performances and other artistic events. In Italian monasteries, for example, nuns were able to write texts that did not deal only with ecclesiastical matters and were often involved in theatre.

In the same vein, monasteries were indeed an ideal choice for the education of the girls of the aristocracy (16th century, Italy). The daily life of young nuns seems to have been quite different from what was expected (Hufton, 2003). In particular, within the monasteries there were usually rich libraries where nuns had the opportunity to choose to study any text they preferred, thus developing their particular inclinations. They also often enjoyed family visits, which alleviated the feeling of confinement.

Furthermore, if they were widowed, they could, of course, especially those in the upper social strata, engage in charity. Such initiatives were usually carried out in consultation with the respective priest of their parish. What's more, it can be claimed that women often enjoyed many freedoms that derived from their contribution to their fellow human beings (caring for the elderly or orphaned children).

It is worth mentioning that on the island of Corfu, female activity can be traced already back to the 14th century. More specifically, the women documented practiced professions that were considered suited for their feminine nature. Such were the professions of nurturer, midwife, and looking after the household (Perrot, 1988). Indeed, being a nurse seems to have been one of the most important professions, since they often took care of the general care and upbringing of infants and followed the family in cases where they had to change their place of residence (Zaridi & Karlafti-Mouratidi, 2010).

The legal capacity of women can be described as limited during the period under review. This is because women often appear to be dependent on their fathers or brother, if their fathers had deceased, whereas, when they married, they were now dependent on their husbands. Both fathers and husbands were therefore obliged to legally represent the daughter or the wife, respectively, in all circumstances (Zaridi & Karlafti-Mouratidi, 2010).

Women acquired legal capacity only when their fathers or husband were no longer alive (Zaridi & Karlafti-Mouratidi, 2010). As a widow, a woman acquired almost full ownership of her household, so that she could manage its financial affairs and



provide for the upbringing of her children (Maltezou, 2010). Of course, this was the case for women from the upper social strata, who often refused to remarry and lose the ability to manage what they had recently acquired, subject to the legal condition of widowhood, which used to be applicable in the Ionian area for centuries. Thus, they appeared in the notarial registers as self-employed in lending, purchase, and lease transactions only when certain conditions were complied with. Indeed, quite often women were able to decide themselves how to resolve their disputes, either by appointing an arbitrator (Limniou, 2000) or by entering into a joint settlement between the opposing parties, without the intervention of a person of known prestige, an expert or a relative.

### **Raising children**

The appointment of representatives and judges seems to have been one of the most common practices adopted by women to defend their interests in any way they were able to. Among the large and varied range of such deeds, the following one, showcasing a woman's attempt to claim her due stands out. It is interesting to pinpoint that this claim concerns a person from her close family circle. In particular, on February 20, 1740 (General State Archives-Archives of Corfu, *Συμβολαιογράφοι* V. K 150, b. 2 (72), p. 47v), a dispute was recorded, where both sides are women related by marriage and who, being widowed, are now independent and able to claim their rights. In the presence of the notary, Sophia, widow of George Kormaris, and her daughter-in-law, Stefoula, widow and usufructuary of Petros Kormaris, son of George, appear before him. Both women appoint as judges the noble Domenigos Kitrakos and the noble Christodoulos Gonemis, to whom they confer and grant all powers to hear the disputes between them and to rule on them, and both sides, as usual, undertake to accept and enforce the arbitral decision. On the following day, therefore, the dispute is settled, both parties being present at the house of one of the two judges, the noble Christodoulos Gonemis. It is worth mentioning that usually in cases where one of the parties was a woman, the meeting of the judges and the opposing parties was held at the woman's house. Of course, in this particular case, considering that both parties were women, self-employed, it is recorded that the announcement of the resolution of their dispute would take place at the house of one of the judges, which is also quite common. Indeed, the arbitral award is announced there, setting out the following. Firstly, from the entire estate of the deceased George, his daughter-in-law, Stefoula, to be able to raise her minor children, would receive  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the property now owned by his wife Sophia, without, of course, affecting the rights of the female children (daughters) of George. The concerns on the part of the judges for a fair resolution of the dispute become apparent, as they try to ensure, on the one hand, that Stefoula meets the basic needs of herself and her children, and on the other hand, that Sophia's children are not treated unfairly (Stamoulis, 2021). In this framework, it should not be overlooked that the application of the applicable law, which designated the widow as the universal administrator of her deceased husband's property, served primarily to provide for the upbringing of their children.

### **Proprietary assets**

In addition, another interesting case is the following, where the woman claims her interests from her brother, who is represented by a third person. On April 10, 1728 (General State Archives-Archives of Corfu, *Συμβολαιογράφοι* V. II 27, b. 8, p. 43r) at the house of the *honorable* Mrs. Bettina, wife of the deceased noble Dimos Antonios Geropetris (he was the son of Dominikos Geropetris who had been awarded the title of Knight of St. Mark), (Pieris, 2010), in the area of the Holy Mother of God, "Antivouniotissa", on the Jewish Mount, the parties gathered to settle the between them differences. They were, on the one side, the honorable signora Katerini Geropetris, acting as a sovereign, self-willing person, and on the other, her brother, signor Athanasios Geropetris, represented by signor Anastasios Kalikiopoulos, with the power (of the latter) to reach any compromise with his sister. Therefore, appearing before a notary, they declare that they will end their disputes concerning the agricultural plots of land in Katakalous, corresponding to her dowry in terms of the immovable assets. With these, they will complete the repayment of 2,500 ducats, which was the amount of her dowry for the immovable goods. Thus, Kalikiopoulos is pleased and grants signora Katerini the right to receive the amount from the lease (pactos) of this agricultural estate, which is 10 reals per year, and it is made clear that when this period has elapsed, possession will be transferred to signor Geropetris, who promises to immediately give her the remaining 906 ducats in kind, namely in vines, olive trees and fields, starting first with the vines and then the olive trees and fields that she has in Castellani, in Alonia area. It is also clarified that in case these assets do not complete the amount of 906 ducats, he promises to give her the balance in as many additional olive trees, which it is made clear will be free of any tax burdens and will be of good quality. For the above valuation, they jointly appointed signor Arsenio Quartano and the signor Juanne Marmaras, on behalf of the lady, as valuers, to whom they give authority to value the property and decide on it.

### **Tenancy agreement**

The following case refers to the same context of economic transactions. As we have seen, one of the most common economic activities in which the presence of women is recorded is tenancy. The following is a typical example of tenancy, since part of the property provided as a tenancy is subleased to a third party. As is often the case, the notary is called upon to appear at the party's home himself, particularly when one of them is a woman. On December 20, 1724 (General State Archives-Archives of Corfu, *Συμβολαιογράφοι* V. II. 27, b. 2, p. 7v), at the house of honorable signora Speratza, daughter and heiress of signor Ioannis Landza and wife of the deceased noble signor Stamatelos Voulgaris in the area of St. Spyridon, gathered for the dispute



between her and Arsenis Megalogenis. This particular dispute concerned the agreed amount of the tenancy which had been determined to be given in kind (goods/animals) and which Megalogenis had undertaken to manage (poseur< possedere= to hold, to possess) (Dokos & Melenti, 1996-1997) both for himself and on behalf of the lady above. Therefore, since a part of these goods is managed by the hirer Anastasios Gogitzi, for this reason, Anastasios' brother, Antonis, appeared before the notary, who declared that, from now on, he would contribute himself, which is one cube of olive oil per year, as well as some chestnuts, which is the annual share for a part of the goods that Megalogenis held as a tenancy. It was also stipulated that this agreement would be valid for 4 years since this is the period of the lease of the goods provided by Megalogenis. That is why the lady received before a notary 36 liters as payment of 2 *xesta* (equivalent to 16 kg) of olive oil, as the agricultural lease for the two years. In addition, she declared that she had received two more *xesta* of olive oil for the past years and declared that she had been fully paid for the 36 lire, the 2 *xesta* olive oil, and the 5 chestnuts owed to her for the 4-year period. It should be noted that this woman was aware of the customs of the time, confirming her repayment and seeking to settle her financial affairs once and for all. Finally, it is surprising that the woman is referred to in this official notarial record by her social title (lady) and not by her name.

### Inheritance management

Another category of contracts showcasing the presence of women is the wills, and especially the management of the inherited assets they contained. Indeed, under the law of the time, women could appear as witnesses to oral wills, but often the testimony of two women seemed to have been 'equivalent' to that of one man. In particular, the following deed refers to an attempt by the parties to peacefully divide a large inherited estate. On May 20, 1772 (General State Archives-Archives of Corfu, *Συμβολαιογράφοι* V. K 163, b. 10, p. 49v), they assembled at the house of the heir of the deceased Spyridon Andronis, in the district of the church of the Holy Mother of God, to carry out what was mentioned in the will (29 July 1708, notarial deeds of signor Daniel Kouvaras) of the deceased Nicholas Pontariol. More specifically, it is stipulated that he wishes his entire estate to be divided into two equal parts. One part will be received by the absent signor Andreas Moraitis as transferee/beneficiary of Maria Antonia Giponi, daughter of Mandalena Giponi who was the daughter of Pontariol, and George and Augustine, brothers Giponi of the deceased Gyon Batista who were the sons of Mandalena. The other half of the estate is ordered to be divided between the present reverend priest Stamos Moraitis and his sister, signora Francesca, wife of the deceased signor Spyridon Andronis because they were children of the deceased Maria, daughter of the deceased Nicholas Pontariol. It is worth mentioning that in contracts, where women were involved as parties, it was customary to give details of their origin, their father's name, and their husband's name if any. In addition, as usual, in the context of the distribution of inherited assets, the necessary assessments had to be made so that each person could receive his or her share. However, because the aforementioned priest, on behalf of his son signor Andreas, wishes that the aforementioned property should not be divided, and on the other hand because also signora Francesca, his sister, wished to receive her share of assets located in the village where she had her dowry assets, so that she can have it all together, wherefore both parties agree by the conclusion of this notarial agreement, and Francesca declares from now and forever that she grants to her brother one-fourth that is due to her from the entire property, according to the aforesaid distribution. As compensation for the above share, her brother (the priest) cedes the ownership of the following property located in the area of the village of Zygos. More specifically, the assets are the following: all old and new olive trees within a defined area, burdened by the quaternion they pay, that is to say, 38 old olive trees and 22 new ones as shown by the distribution he made together with the deceased signor Antonio Moraitis, his brother. Moreover, he gives her the 11 olive trees, burdened by the one-third paid, releasing them from the agricultural tenancy held by the deceased Christophoros Chondrogiannis. Still, the right of collecting the tax of one and a half *xesta* of olive oil per harvest paid to him by the priest-Evstathios Vasilakis for the expenses of the olive mill owned by the priest in this village, and the share in the house. These assets including their taxes were stipulated to be owned and managed by signora Francesca, who would receive their "*fruits*" (usufruct). Under this agreement, the two brothers waived any legal dispute existing between them and indeed Francesca waived the dispute existing between her and her nephew, signor Andreas, because of the above concessions and this agreement was agreed to be in force forever. The parties guaranteed to abide by the agreement with all their assets, present, and future, and that their heirs and successors would also abide by the agreement. Interestingly, the woman in this deed was able to negotiate with her brother the share she wished to receive. In addition, it appears that this claim had also led her to go to court, but without the continuation of the legal proceedings. Finally, it is important that she was able to manage her interests as she saw fit.

Often, as already seen, the opposing sides turned to the judicial authorities for cases concerning the management of their inheritance. That is to say, the settlement of inheritance disputes, after having previously resorted to legal remedies, either while the case was pending or even if it had become final. In this case, as well, the presence of women is special, since it is recorded both about the claim and the estate management. Although the settlement of disputes related to inheritance is a frequent finding in the notarial registers, what is of interest is nevertheless found in the acts that women take part in as self-employed. One such case occurred on March 19, 1737 (General State Archives-Archives of Corfu, *Συμβολαιογράφοι* V. K. 239, b. 2, p. 46v), where the parties gathered at the house of the Mr. Theodoros Gardikiotis in the area of the Monastery of the Holy Virgin Mary of Limiotissa towards the Judean Mount to settle the parties' disputes with each other. More specifically, on the



one side, signora Theodora, wife of the deceased signor Simos Paipetis and heir of her aunt, signora Grazioza, and on the other, Mr. Theodore Gardikiotis. For the disputes concerning the aforementioned inheritance, they had both appealed before the Court of the local Venetian administration and in Venice itself, without specifying the timing and progress of the case by these judicial authorities. But now the two parties jointly decided to stop the disputes between them, and therefore withdrew any report that had been made in the past. Interestingly, they stipulate that Theodora will leave to Gardikiotis all those fields that were until the present day worked, burdened with tax, and that Gardikiotis will acquire ownership of the olive trees located in the area of Pelekas. Moreover, concerning the house where he and his wife, Marietta, now reside, it is made clear that Theodora, out of her extreme Christian kindness, grants that they may have it throughout their lifetime and that afterward it shall pass into her ownership. It becomes clear at this point that Theodora is both generous and capable, knowing her needs on the one hand, and her financial affairs on the other, of managing her assets in various ways. Subsequently, because Gardikiotis was very satisfied with the settlement between them, he undertook to hand over to her all the necessary documents relating to the inheritance in question to enable the administration of the assets that had been seized. Furthermore, an important element of this act is that the two parties decide to resolve the disputes between them without explicitly mentioning whether they made this decision because of the mediation of a third person or because of the delay in the resolution of the dispute by the formal judicial body.

An extremely interesting notarial deed that demonstrates the complex female economic activity is the following. It is a distinctive contract, which contains elements of two different categories of legal transactions: employment contracts and loan contracts. On March 17, 1795, 1795 (General State Archives-Archives of Corfu, *Συμβολαιογράφοι* V. A 514, b. 14, p. 37r) at the house of Father Hierodeacon Antonios Mistos, in the district of the church of St. Demetrios and St. James Persus, Lady Nicoleta (in many cases the notary, when referring to women, records the members to whom she was once or still is a supervisor) (Karlafti-Mouratidi, 2012), daughter of the deceased Anastasios Kynigis (called Karantzas) and wife of Lord Anastasios Bregadis, on the one hand, and the Venerable Isaac Hieromonk Kompolitis concluded the following agreement. First, Nicoletta appoints Kompolitis as vicar of the church of Panagia Eleousa (Karidis, Dimoulas, Poulis, 2018), which is located in the suburb of Garitsa, where Nicoletta holds ownerships rights. Kompolitis then promises to be on duty and officiate in the above church for two years and makes it clear that he will provide the wax, olive oil, and incense at his own expense. As a reward for this work, Nicoletta grants him all the privileges that come from this particular position (everything a priest deserves) and pledges that she will additionally give him 5 *xesta* of olive oil as income in kind from the olive oil of this church. Furthermore, provision is also made for the residence of the vicar, since it is declared that for two years, Nicoletta will give him for his residence the cell existing in the aforesaid church. However, the deed is not completed here but is followed by the conclusion of a loan between the same parties, where the lender is the priest and the borrower is the owner of the right of possession of the aforementioned church. In particular, Kompolitis, before a notary and witnesses, paid Nicoletta 30 Venetian talaras as a loan and for the sake of friendship; Nicoletta promised to repay it at the end of two years, and it is important to note that it is stated that no interest will be calculated on this sum. It is then recorded that if she does not return them at that time, then Kompolitis will remain vicar for another two years and his term of office will be renewed every two years until the 30 talaras are returned. Nicoletta, to secure the repayment of the loan, binds, and mortgages one of her houses and undertakes, at her own expense, to make the necessary repairs to the church and the cell. Two different legal roles for each of the parties and two different types of economic relations, with no predetermined date of termination of this peculiar contract.

## Conclusion

As it was understood, the position of the woman in the period under consideration had some peculiarities. In particular, if one disregards the social constraints she faced, it seems that subject to certain conditions, she was able to exercise many of her rights. This was mainly the case when she left a widow, who was now free to manage her late husband's property. In this context, it seems that the woman seized the opportunity to carry out many kinds of transactions in defense of her interests, but also to carry out charitable acts. As mentioned, if not married, they often chose to join a monastery, which often served as a place of religious worship and also carried out many activities, allowing them a distinctive form of freedom.

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