Activity 4.6

1. Outline the four social levels Athenian citizens could occupy.
2. Approximately what percentage of the Athenian population were citizens in the mid-fifth century BCE?
3. Give two reasons why men were not involved in the daily running of their households.
4. Ordinarily, when were all members of an Athenian family most likely to be together?

Metics and slaves

Metics were resident aliens with no political rights. They were not allowed to own land, and could not obtain citizenship. However, many were involved in trade and industry, and became very wealthy. Although not possessing political rights, metics enjoyed similar privileges to citizens in some areas. Estimates of the metic population in Athens by the mid-fifth century BCE are between 30,000 and 50,000.

Slaves constituted the lowest level of Athenian society, but made up at least half of the population of 70,000 to 100,000. Slaves could be owned either privately or by the state. State-owned slaves worked on the roads, in the dockyards and on public buildings. The lowest class of slaves worked in the silver mines at Laurium.

Privately owned slaves were treated better. They worked in wealthy houses where many held positions of trust. In Athens, slaves worked in every capacity imaginable, and were as familiar a sight as free members of the society.

Slaves came from a variety of origins: some were prisoners of war, others were unwanted children, some had been sold into slavery alongside their fathers for the payment of their fathers’ debts, and still others had been born into slavery.

Privately owned slaves could be freed by their masters’ oral pronouncement, in the sight of witnesses at the theatre or before a public tribunal. However, between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE this practice was outlawed in Athens to protect public order. A slave was often required to pay an amount at least equivalent to his market value to free himself. To do this, he could use his savings or take a loan (eranos) from his master, a friend or a client. Freedom could be either total or partial, at the master’s whim. A totally emancipated slave was legally protected against all attempts at re-enslavement, particularly by the former master’s inheritors. Freed slaves acquired a status similar to metics, but did not have the rights of a citizen.

Sparta: A unique society

Sparta was a polis in the region called Lakonia in the southeastern Peloponnese, about 250 kilometres from Athens. It was unique in all Hellas because its social system was completely focused on military training and excellence in the art of warfare. The descendants of the Dorians who had settled Lakonia at the end of the Mycenaean period, the Spartans had invaded and conquered neighbouring Messene in the eighth century BCE and the Messenian population had become helots, a serf class distributed to Spartan masters.

Spartan society was divided into the following ranks:

- Spartiates – with the exception of the royal families, they were native-born male citizens over the age of 30, who had passed all stages of the agoge (the Spartan education system). They belonged to a syssitia (a military group that supported its members, who were
full-time soldiers – *bopitres* – and shared meals together). Each Spartan owned a plot of farming land. They saw themselves as equals who shared in a communal society. Even so, there were unfair advantages based on wealth. They never numbered more than 10,000.

- **Perioikoi** – literally ‘surrounding’ *(peri-)householders’ *(oikot). They were not citizens but members of different communities spread around the Peloponnese that were allied to Sparta. The *perioikoi* made up half of the Spartan army, and had a monopoly on trade and manufacturing.

- **Inferiors** – known by a number of different terms, inferiors were those who failed the *agoge* or could not maintain their contributions to the *syssitia*; those who had lost their citizenship through cowardice in war; children of unwed *helot* mothers and Spartan fathers; or *helots* who had become freed men through service in war.

- **Helots** – state-owned serfs (rural workers) bound to the land who could not be bought and sold. *Helots* worked the land and did most of the *menial* labour – thus freeing Spartiates from such work to concentrate on military training. They were entitled to a portion of what they produced. Some historians estimate that they outnumbered the Spartiates by seven to one.

Spartian boys joined the *agoge* from the age of seven, living in army barracks. Aside from athletics, fitness and weapons training, the program included dance and music. Food was deliberately rationed to encourage resourcefulness in stealing it – but if caught stealing, boys were severely beaten. At the age of 20, they became fully part of a *syssition* and the Spartan army, and continued to live in barracks.
The aim of the system was to ensure that every Spartiate would be able to:
- have self-discipline
- endure physical and mental hardship
- show unquestioning obedience to superiors
- be loyal to the state
- possess superior fighting skills.
Spartan girls were educated separately, with physical training including running and athletics – sometimes with boys in the agoge.

They run in the following way: their hair hangs down, a tunic reaches to a little above the knee, and they bare the right shoulder as far as the breast.

Source 4.1: A description of Spartan female runners at Olympia given by Pausanias (Book V, 16.2–3)

Activity 4.7
1. List three types of teachers found in ancient Athens.
2. What were considered suitable activities for a 'good wife'?
3. Who or what was a metic?
4. How many slaves are there estimated to have been in Athens during the mid-fifth century BCE?
5. Discuss what was unique about Spartan women.
6. Create a mind map of the factors that contributed to Sparta’s reputation as a military society. You may find more than four factors.

Ruled by the minority of Spartiates, Sparta was an oligarchy, headed by two hereditary kings, who had some powers, balanced by a council of elders known as the gerousta who were consulted during meetings of the public assembly, attended by all male Spartiates. The assembly elected five overseers, known as ephors, who helped to expedite decision-making in times of duress. The assembly was ultimately in control of the policies and legislation of the polis.