As with most of the ancient world, the role and status of women in Pompeii and Herculaneum is hard to interpret as they are so infrequently represented in the written record. The evidence that we have for the role of women exists in the occasional statue, fresco, mosaic, and some pieces of graffiti.

What we do know is that the women in these cities had more rights than many other women in the ancient world. Women could own property, they could run businesses and they could hold prominent religious roles in the city.

Women were not allowed to vote and could not hold political positions. They could, however, express their opinions on politics, and we see many pieces of political graffiti signed by women urging citizens to vote for certain candidates. *(see Quote 6.1)* Approximately 14.5% of electoral graffiti in Pompeii seems to have been written by females.

Generally, the role of women was a domestic one. Women completed domestic duties and raised the children. Upper class women were often educated and could read and write. Wall paintings of women holding writing implements reveal that this ability was revered in Roman society *(see Image 6.2)*. At the other end of the spectrum, many women were slaves and worked in households as domestic servants, or in shops, *fullonica* and farms.

Prostitutes were primarily female, and worked in the brothels of Pompeii. They were referred to as “Lupae” or “she wolves” and at the time of the eruption were required to register as a prostitute with the aedile’s office, and pay taxes on their earnings. Many prostitutes were foreigners and slaves working for their masters. No brothels have been discovered in Herculaneum to date.

*Quote 6.1* - Maria’s electoral graffiti, Pompeii.


*Quote 6.3* - Graffiti instructing the passer by about a prostitute in Nuceria. Pompeii.

*Quote 6.4* - Inscription from marble hanging sign, Herculaneum.
Eumachia

Eumachia was a very prominent and wealthy priestess of the Imperial Cult in Pompeii. She was the matron of Concordia Augustus - a cult that honoured the deceased Roman emperor.

Eumachia was a member of one of Pompeii’s oldest families. She was a patron of the fullers, and used her considerable wealth to construct a building on the eastern side of the Forum. The exact function of this building is unknown, but it may have been a guild for the fullers, as the fullers dedicated a statue to her within this building (see Image 6.5 & Quote 6.6).

Her dedicatory inscription on the sides of this building reveal a fair amount of information about her (see Quote 6.7): we know that Eumachia was the “daughter of Lucius”, she was a “public priestess”, she had a son named “Marcus Numistrius Fronto”, and that she built the building “at her own expense”. What is interesting about these details is that they also reveal Eumachia’s status as a woman. The fact that Eumachia’s father’s name was mentioned is indicative of the fact that women were subservient to the paterfamilias. However, the inscription also reveals that women could accrue their own wealth, independent of males. The mention of her son on the inscription was probably to enhance his status for any future political aspirations that he may have.

During her lifetime, Eumachia began construction of her own tomb outside the Nuceria Gate. It is the largest tomb found to date in Pompeii, measuring 14 metres long and 13 metres deep. It features an Amazonian frieze above a traditional seat tomb.
Mamia

Another prominent priestess at Pompeii was Mamia. Women from the elite could not hold political office, but could become prominent in public life as priestesses. Priestesses often used their wealth as generous benefactors, and Mamia was no different. Just like Eumachia, Mamia made a significant contribution to the east side of the Forum, as it seems that she was responsible for the building of the Temple of Vespasian. The exact location of the original inscription is unknown, but the writing states that Mamia built the building “on her own land and (at her) own expense”.

Upon her death, Mamia was awarded a tomb in a prominent position outside the Herculaneum Gate. The inscription on her seat tomb states that her place of burial was awarded by the town councilors, emphasizing her prominent position in society and the esteem that she was held in.

Julia Felix

The estate of Julia Felix was located near the Amphitheater in Insula 2. It was a very large estate with its own private bath complex, pool and expansive gardens. An inscription painted on the front of her property reveals that some of her rooms were for lease, revealing that women were able to be landlords.

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KEY UNDERSTANDING:

1. Why is there a lack of information about women in the ancient record?

2. What were women restricted from doing in these cities?

3. Generally, what was the role of a female?

4. Were all women educated?

5. What jobs did female slaves complete?

6. What restrictions were placed on prostitutes?

7. What was Eumachia’s occupation?

8. What building did Eumachia construct in the Forum?

9. How is Eumachia’s tomb indicative of her wealth?

10. What was Mamia’s occupation?

11. What building did Mamia probably build?

12. Who was Julia Felix?

SOURCE WORK:

1. What does Quote 6.1 reveal about the political influence of women?

2. How does Image 6.2 reveal that literacy was revered in Roman society? Does the painting necessarily mean that the baker Terentius and his wife were educated?

3. With reference to Quote 6.4 and 6.12, what does evidence reveal about women and property ownership in Pompeii and Herculaneum?
4. What do Quotes 6.6, 6.7, 6.10 and 6.11 reveal about the role and status of priestesses in Pompeii?

__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
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**ACTIVITY:**
Research these 3 other females from Pompeii and Herculaneum, and answer the following questions about each:

- **Naeveoleia Tyche**
- **Sabina Poppaea**
- **Viciria Archas**

1. Which city was she from?
2. Who was she?
3. What evidence do we have for her?
4. What does this evidence reveal about their life and/or death?