

Role Overload and the Greek American Woman

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Note: Each Greek American woman is unique. Some or all of what I say may not apply to you or your friends or family.

Some Definitions:

Role: refers to the part you play in your family and in society.

Traditional roles for women include family and housekeeping roles, volunteering, serving, nurturing others, maintaining ties with the extended family and friends, etc.

Non-traditional roles or modern roles for women include going to school, having a career or job outside the home, or taking on any kind of major responsibility outside of the home or family.

- 1. One purpose of this presentation is to help you appreciate all you do by pointing out how many roles you have.**

Traditionally, **being a wife and homemaker** involves not only being a companion to one's husband, but being a cook, a nurse, a social secretary, and hostess, as well as preparing for the holidays, taking care of appliances -- and the list goes on. One key role that's often overlooked is the **emotional work** so many women do, such as, keeping in touch with family, neighbors, etc., and arranging for various social events, etc.

These **etceteras** keep the family and/or office and/or church or other organization going and connected to the world. Yet rarely are they reimbursed or socially recognized.

Similarly, **being a mother** involves more than loving, feeding, and dressing your children. It also includes being a chauffeur, helping children with homework, handling child crises, attending special children's events -- and the list goes on.

If you're single, separated, divorced or widowed, unless you can afford to hire help or are living with someone who is helpful, then you have to do everything and have all kinds of roles.

There's also **the "little nothings"** that women do. These are vital to the functioning of the family (or the office). But they tend to be invisible (like making sure there's enough toilet paper, refilling the napkin holder, answering phone calls, arranging for any number of family and social events) and usually are not recognized, much less appreciated. Yet they consume time and mental energy.

There's also the **role of coordinating all these roles**. And, for some, the role of **trying to look good** (i.e., the "beauty" role).

2. **Whether you work outside the home or not**, because you're Greek American or connected to the Greek culture by marriage, there's a good chance that
 - a. you might be **doing more (or have more roles)** than a non-ethnic woman, like your all-American next-door neighbor; and
 - b. for any number of reasons, sometimes it may be harder or more complicated for you to do what you do because you come from a collectivist background, but live in an individualistic society.
3. **Individualistic vs. Collective Societies** (Most societies include elements of both, but usually one standard dominates.)

In Individualistic Societies (like US)

- a. The focus is on self-development, self-fulfillment, personal happiness, and "doing your own thing in your own way"

- b. Personal goals and needs are often considered to be more important than (or at least as important as) group or community goals or the needs of the family.
- c. Independence is the norm. Meeting your personal needs and goals is considered more important than group harmony or fulfilling obligations to others. Individualist ideas such as, “Your life belongs to you and you alone. So you don’t owe anybody anything,” would be foreign to our immigrant ancestors.

In Collectivist Societies (like Greek villages and many Hispanic, Russian, Asian, and Arab groups)

- a. Family and community obligations take priority over personal happiness and self-development.
- b. The focus is on cultural values, emotional closeness, and friendships rather than individual achievement. For example, your identity involves a “family self.”
- c. **Please note: I’m not saying “Americans” don’t love their families** or that Greeks and Greek Americans don’t want to achieve. In fact, Greek culture applauds personal achievement which can give rise to a conflict between the pressure to achieve and the pressure to meet family, church, and other interpersonal and/or community obligations.
- d. This conflict (between the need to achieve and the need to maintain one’s relationships) is not unique to Greek Americans. However, most Greek Americans come from backgrounds where there was greater emphasis on family and community ties than exists in today’s US.

4. Role Overload can occur

- a. When new roles are added to your life without subtracting or making changes in the old roles: E.g., if you take on a job or another volunteer position, yet try to keep up with everything else you used to do.

- b. The demands of one of your roles increases (e.g., a family member becomes ill or extra time is demanded of you at work), especially if the situation becomes long-term.
 - c. When there's role conflict, e.g., competing time demands or no way to fulfill one role without shortchanging another. This can lead to painful choices between two equally important priorities.
5. If you're trying to be true to your Greek self, yet live in an individualistic society, you may have **more role overload and more role conflicts** than women who aren't part of a collectivist ethnic group. Here's why:
- a. Greek American women, even in their traditional home roles, have more roles than non-ethnic women. Although there can be **fulfillment and joy in these roles**, sometimes having all these roles can lead to role conflict and overload.
 - b. Greek American women have **more holidays and religious events** to prepare for than their non-ethnic neighbors; i.e., they have to prepare not just for American holidays, but for the Greek ones.
 - c. The preparations for these holidays and/or religious events are often quite elaborate. (If you're Greek American, you can't get by with serving cheese and crackers for Easter. You have to have a *trapezi*; i.e., an elaborate meal with multiple main and side dishes and traditional time-consuming desserts, such as *kourampiedes*.)
 - d. Such preparations are more involved if you have relatives who would criticize you for ordering a "Greek Easter To-Go" dinner or serving sweets purchased from a Greek American bakery.
 - e. You may have special **regional customs** to keep up with, such as multiple pre-wedding parties and special ceremonies for new mothers, as well as religious events that require special foods that can't be bought, like *aleuvra*, *psilokouloura*, *koliva*, etc.

- f. You have **more relatives and people** (e.g., your godparents, your second and third cousins and their godparents, your in-laws' extended family and their godparents, persons from your village or region in Greece, etc.) to keep in touch with, and it's **more important** to keep up with them.
- g. You end up **more involved with family crises, including those of the extended family, godparents, etc.**

E.g., if your *nouno* (godfather) dies, you are expected to do more than send your *nouna* (godmother) condolences via email. And your involvement may not stop with the funeral.

- h. You may also have the **role of trying to keep your "Greekness" alive** in some way, e.g., by watching Greek TV, attending Greek American events, or doing things with your children to teach them about their heritage, like taking them to Greek school.
- i. You may be **fighting to maintain a sense of family**. For many Greek American mothers, it's not okay to have just a text relationships with their teens. So they try to have more family events and outings – all of which take time, energy, and usually a lot of scheduling coordination.
- j. Depending on how exposed you were to old-fashioned Greek values, there may be **more than one set of expectations for how you fulfill your traditional roles**.

E.g., although you made the *spanakopita* yourself, your mother-in-law won't eat it because you used store-bought *filo* (pastry leaves) instead of making the *filo* from scratch.

- 6. The new cultural expectation, even in various Greek American circles, is that women have some kind of career outside the home. This may be

liberating or oppressive, depending on the woman and her circumstances.

Either way, sex role expectations die hard, especially among Greek Americans. Hence usually the woman continues to do or take responsibility for most of the housework and childcare. (How many women do you know who have husbands or partners who do more housework or childcare than they do?)

Consequently, the woman now has what constitutes two full-time jobs, which can result in role conflict and overload, and hence fatigue.

7. **Home-work conflicts are difficult for most women, but especially hard for Greek American women** due to the heavy emphasis of Greek culture on family and communal life. If a woman doesn't **have to** work to keep the family afloat and is pursuing a career for personal satisfaction, she may be viewed as "selfish" -- or as neglecting her family or her church.
8. On the other hand, her **non-Greek co-workers** may question how committed she can be to her job if she's so committed to her family.

Or her American friends (and even some of her Greek friends or her younger and allegedly "more liberated" female relatives) may view her strong family bonds as signs of **being "too old-fashioned"** or as signs of **co-dependency** (thus implying that she is an emotional cripple who doesn't have an identity apart from loving or helping others).

9. **Sacrifices** Family commitments often require sacrifice; and Greek history and tradition is full of people, both men and women, who made plenty of sacrifices for others.

Yet when a Greek American woman makes sacrifices for her family (or church), some of her American friends--or even her Greek ones--may warn her that she's going to "lose her identity" or "her personality" if she keeps "giving too much" and chide her for loving her family "too much."

10. But for many Greek Americans (both men and women), there's no such thing as "loving the family too much." In their view, sacrificing for the family (or some other cause) doesn't rob you of your unique identity; i.e., you can make sacrifices and still be your own person.

P.S. I'm not advocating being a martyr or total self-sacrifice. It's just that what's considered "too much" to non-Greeks may be a normal part of having Greek roots.

11. The Sandwich Generation refers to those who find themselves caring for both the younger and older generation. This is very stressful for anyone, male or female, Greek and non-Greek.

12. Sandwiched in a Sandwich

The Greek American woman, however, may find herself sandwiched in a sandwich. E.g., Voula has a family and a job and takes care of her aging parents. She helps her parents not just because this is expected of her, but because she **wants** to.

"The Americans think I do too much for my parents; but for the Greeks, I can never do enough," Voula sighs. "Americans berate me for not putting myself first; Greeks, for serving my parents frozen dinners. Yet Americans also envy our close family ties. But then my great-aunt from Greece, who waited on her parents and in-laws hand and foot, warns me not to be a martyr like she was."

13. Heroic Expectations: Some of Voula's Greek friends expect her to be able to carry on with her work, parenting, and other responsibilities as if she didn't have elder care duties. But it's more than that: Voula expects this of herself too.

14. Superwoman So sometimes Voula tries to be a superwoman and "do it all" and "do it all perfectly" -- and make it look effortless and not complain.

After all, her mother and grandmother worked long hours in the family business while also caring for children and parents. So Voula doesn't feel entitled to be fatigued or nervous. Instead she tries to be a "superwoman," thus avoiding disapproval of others and guilt from within.

Yet the additional time, energy, and thought involved in being part of the "sandwich generation" may not be recognized, either by Voula or those around her. They may take all she does for granted.

15. I hope this presentation has helped you appreciate yourselves!