The Changing Roles of Italian American Women

Reality vs. Myth

Susanna Tardi

Using a sociohistorical approach, this essay examines the changing roles of women of Italian heritage in the context of (1) subcultural (Italian) norms and values, (2) dominant (“American”) cultural norms and values, and (3) changing structural conditions (i.e., World War II, the labor market, and the women’s movement). Media reinforcement of dominant cultural norms and values is also addressed.

I have been conducting research on Italian Americans since the mid-1970s, and have found that the type of research available concerning Italian American women has remained largely unchanged. Descriptions and explanations of the norms and values of Italian Americans, and in particular of women’s roles, have been provided mostly through literature, poetry, anthologies, and autobiographies—genres that offer subjective “revelations” of cultural experiences. While these works contain rich histories, they do not provide concrete information that is readily generalizable to the population of Italian American women.

Italian American Women: Four Generations in Perspective

To provide a sociohistorical analysis of Italian American women, it is important to comprehend the role of women in Italy prior to peak migration (1880–1910). These women were embedded in a patriarchal (father-headed) but matricentric (mother-centered) society. In Italy, no distinction was made between labor inside or outside of the home. In Italy, household production was central to the economy of southern Italy. In the Italian family, contributions to the family and interdependence were valued, whereas “American” values focused on independence and
self-fulfillment. As the familial socioeconomic status declined, the importance of the “mother” role increased in the Italian family.

In a world where the family was judged not by the occupation of the father but by the signs of family well-being which emanated from the household, the mother played an important role in securing their status.1

Consequently, for the peasants in particular, there was a power dimension to the mother role, since she was a contributor to the household production, and was largely responsible for creating perceptions of family well-being. This was achieved by her ability to “manage” the household and utilize creativity and ingenuity. In a culture steeped in family, food, and pride, never displaying “mala figura” (a bad impression) was of key importance.

When these immigrant women came to the United States, sometimes months or even years after their husbands, they were confronted with an economic necessity to earn more money for family survival and well-being. The Mezzogiorno (areas south and east of Rome) “code of honor” possessed cultural norms and values (cultural “baggage”) that prohibited them from interacting with gli stranieri (outsiders, literally “the strangers”), particularly those of the opposite sex. During the wave of Italian immigration to the United States, male workers dominated the American labor market. This contributed to many Italian immigrant women earning additional money for the family by engaging in occupations that were home-based, such as laundering, tailoring, flower-arranging, and pasta- and bread-making. This working environment did not threaten family solidarity. Even taking boarders into the household was considered preferable to the Italian woman than leaving the home to work.2 In New York, Italian immigrant women working in the garment industry was permitted because coworkers were female.3

Isolating cultural factors to account for the participation of Italian women in the labor market is inadequate. Miriam Cohen’s research on Italian immigrants in New York City from 1900–1950 suggests that Italian patriarchal norms and values did not inhibit daughters from external participation in the American labor market.4 Newly arrived male immigrants experienced more problems securing employment than other immigrant cohorts, so daughters in these families went to work out of necessity. However, the longer the male household head lived in America, the less likely it was for the daughter to be engaged in the labor market. It seems that for at least as long as the economic necessity for family stability existed, modified norms and values permitting women to work outside the home existed. The interaction between economic, demographic, and cultural factors must be considered in understanding female Italian American labor force participation.

While American society was and is patriarchal, similar to Italian society, it lacked the power dimension of the mother in Italian society. When Italians first immigrated to the United States, they tended to cluster together in urban ghettos (areas predominantly consisting of others from the same cultural background), out of choice (subcultural similarities), and necessity (jobs and affordable housing). Italian immigrant women frequently lived in ghettos, and if they did not work outside of the home, their exposure to the norms and values of the dominant culture was less than their male “working” counterparts. This segregation of Italian American women from the dominant culture was maintained until the 1950s.