Labour/Le Travailleur

Women, Work, and Protest in the Italian Diaspora: An International Research Agenda

Donna Gabaccia et Franca Iacovetta

Volume 42, 1998

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt42rr01

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)
Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN
0700-3862 (imprimé)
1911-4842 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article
HOW DO WE THEORIZE global migration, family economies, and labour activism from a women-centred perspective? How do feminist and gendered frameworks challenge histories of diasporas, nationalisms, and the international proletariat? We aim to explore these questions by focusing on the roughly 27 million people who in the 19th and 20th centuries left the geographical expression called Italy. Our work brings together colleagues from four continents in a collaborative project on Italian working women in Italy, Europe, North and South America, and Australia.¹

We intend to probe persistent myths and distorted images of Italian women, and rethink some of the categories central to migration and diaspora scholarship. Indeed, our project should help historicize social scientific analyses of migration that treat step-migration, return migration, and transnationalism as new phenomena.

¹Participants include Paola Corti (France), Anne Morelli (Belgium), Jennifer Guglielmo and Diane Vecchio (USA), Ros Pesman (Australia), Robert Ventresca (North America), Linda Reeder, Maddalena Tirabassi and Andreina deClemente (Italy), Carina Silberstein (Argentina), and Chiara Vangelista (Brazil).

characteristic of today's migrants in contradistinction to the settler immigrants of the past. The latter term has emerged in anthropological studies of contemporary migration, which generally focus on one migrant group in the sending and receiving regions (usually the US) and depict transnationalism as a life-style or an identity facilitated by a post-modern, high-tech, late 20th century global economy. This approach slights the long history of migration and the migrant workers who in the past also criss-crossed the globe and built cross-border lives.

The sheer volume of Italian migrations of the past two centuries suggests the centrality of migration to modern Italian life. The total number of Italians who left home in these years about equaled the population of the newly unified Italian nation. The demographic impact abroad was dramatic and enduring. Early 20th-century Buenos Aires and Sao Paolo emerged as semi-Italianized cities. Both New York and Toronto at times have claimed Italian populations larger than Rome's. Italians have also composed a sizeable component of the labour forces of France, Switzerland, and Germany. Today, the numbers of descendants of Italian migrants, estimated at more than sixty million, exceeds the population of Italy. Still, historically, Italian immigrants did not fit the settler profile very well. Between 1870 and 1970, about half of Italy's migrants returned home, and a large but unknown proportion emigrated repeatedly over several decades. Migration thus became an ordinary way of life for generations of people. Most of Italy's citizens probably enjoyed ties of kin and friendship to Italians abroad. In certain regions of heavy emigration, such ties persisted, giving rise to a culture in which emigration, transnational families, and politics abroad were normal and integrated features of everyday life.3

Reflections on Current Scholarship

Here, we reflect critically on the theoretical implications of recent scholarship for writing a woman-centred, gendered, and proletarian history of the Italian diaspora. Diaspora scholarship generally highlights questions of identity and language, usually to the neglect of analyses of class, state, and society. Recent comparative studies in Italian migration, including one now underway on labour migrants and militants, have appropriately drawn attention to class, politics, economy, and culture, but have not satisfactorily integrated women's lives or gender dynamics into their frameworks.4 In considering the relevant literatures, we offer some suggestions for rethinking the connections among gender, culture, class, and


4On the "Italian Workers Around the World" project, see Donna Gabaccia and Fraser Ottanelli "Diaspora or International Proletariat?" _Diasporas_ 6 (Spring 1997); their newsletter, and conference program, "For Us There are No Frontiers" Tampa, Florida, April 1996.
state in the history of immigrant workers and communities. So doing, we have had to confront a wide variety of national historiographies and considerable variation in quality and quantity of research undertaken on Italians in different nation states. More particularly, we explore the complex ways in which economy and culture have shaped male and female agency during periods of Italian migration and labour activism. We seek to move beyond the polarized character — or, the culture versus economy impasse — that characterizes historical work on Italian women. In place of reductionist explanations of Italian immigrant behaviour that privilege either structural or cultural explanations (usually to the neglect of the other) we grapple with ways of understanding the interplay of structural determinants, cultural traditions, political identities, and human agency.

Several literatures have informed our efforts to combine gender and international approaches to Italian migration. Our debt to women’s history is plainly evident in our focus on women’s material lives within peasant and industrial family economies, the links between women’s reproductive lives and waged work, and female activism — though we also draw on gendered histories of men, work, and community. Our theoretical thinking is most directly influenced by three bodies of work. First is the literature on women and development, largely in today’s “third world” or written by scholars of world systems analysis. Given that today’s migrations are increasingly female in composition, this scholarship offers relevant insights regarding unwaged work and the economic parallels between peasant subsistence production and modern housework, and the triple oppression of minority women. Complex issues related to the cultural preferences for either individualism or group solidarity and the possibility of measuring cross-culturally either patriarchy or female autonomy also emerge in this literature, and are shaped in part by troubled relations between “rich world” and “third world” feminists. Second, we draw extensively on feminist labour history, especially in the USA, Britain, and Canada, where scholars have grappled with the links between women’s waged and


unwaged work, between family responsibilities and labour activism, and women's relations with male co-workers and political comrades. Gendered labour studies have probed crucial interconnections among workplace and household, and highlighted the deeply politicized and gendered cultural world of ethnic radicals. Third, we find highly suggestive Victoria De Grazia's work on the nationalization of Italian women under fascism — which explores women's relationship to the state under a regime that laid claim to their loyalties and reproductive capacities as mothers of the race while denying them the entitlements of citizenship (including the vote). Thinking about gender and nation-building also links our work to a broader multi-disciplinary literature on nationalism, post-colonialism, and subaltern peoples originating in the work of Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak. Feminist scholars particularly remind us that men and women


may acquire national identities in differing fashion and with differing consequences.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Men without Women?: Gendered Dimensions of Migration}

\textbf{ITALIAN LABOUR} migrations in the 19th and 20th centuries were overwhelmingly — as high as sixty to eighty per cent — male during particular periods.\textsuperscript{13} In explaining this pattern, however, we face two possibly conflicting interpretations. One emphasizes the demands of a segmented labour market and growing demand for specifically male workers in receiving countries. The other stresses the conservatism of Latin patriarchal culture: men seek to control female sexuality by limiting them to a narrow, physical community (usually the village) in which women and their gossip effectively regulate female behaviour. In this and other ways, it is argued, an enduring code of family honour that attached enormous value to the sexual purity of wives, daughters, and sisters, allowed for the strict supervision of women’s lives.\textsuperscript{14}

Can these interpretations be reconciled? On the economic side, we know that Italian men responded to a growing international demand for two types of male labour in the 19th century: most worked either in plantation agriculture or as the “human steam shovels” who built the infrastructure of the capitalist world economy, including railways, streets, tunnels, sewers, subways, and factories. The search for wages in the global economy took men near and far: the mines of Belgium, Germany, north Africa, western Canada, and southern US; sugar and cotton plantations of South America and Louisiana; orchards and vineyards of California and western Australia; and public works projects on several continents. Desired for their capacity to perform hard labour but despised as racially inferior and as economic competitors, Italian male migrants were frequently excluded from local labour movements and stigmatized by derisive labels such as “sweatback,” “dago,” “the Chinese of Europe,” and Australia’s “olive peril.”\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{13} The main data on Italian migration arranged by receiving country is in Walter F. Willcox, \textit{International Migrations} (New York 1931).

\textsuperscript{14} Gabaccia, \textit{From the Other Side}, ch 3.

A growing demand for female migrant labour during the 19th century was closely associated with two different developments: the rise of the middle classes and an accompanying demand for domestic servants in urban areas; and, to a far less extent, increasing job opportunities in the "female industries" that developed in tandem with the "deskilling" and displacement of (generally male) artisanal workers during "the second industrial revolution." In Italy, too, where Latin understandings of patriarchy reigned, textile factories and "light" manufacturing, as well as domestic service, offered large numbers of single women and daughters new work opportunities beyond the agrarian worlds where their earlier migrations had occurred. This suggests that the "code" of female "honour and shame" was malleable and class-specific, although it presumably intensified with the growing cultural hegemony of the urban middle classes in Italy after national unification (1861). We thus caution against easy generalizations about peculiarities of Italian culture; the concept of women's shame, and the view that women's mobility was strictly controlled, need more scrutiny.

Some 19th-century patterns may help us to sort out the interaction of economy and culture in shaping Italian migrant sex ratios. First, gender ratios varied considerably from region to region and across time, and appear to have been largely determined by several related factors: the destination of migrants, the nature of the particular labour markets to which migrants responded, and the patterns of peasant economy and agricultural change in their home regions. (See Table 1.) Table 1 shows that the supposedly more modern, Europeanized north of Italy actually had lower rates of female migration than the supposedly conservative south. To emphasize a cultural explanation, then, we must stress that patriarchal concerns made women's migration (as parts of family) more common in the south, whereas northerners tolerated long periods of separation between husbands and wives and children.

But work opportunities also mattered. In much of mountainous northern Italy, where peasant families maintained fairly firm access to their own lands, older women's work on the land freed younger women to migrate to textile factory jobs in nearby cities, such as Biella, Turin, and Milan. Also freed to migrate were men, many of whom took up seasonal jobs as construction workers in neighbouring trans-alpine Europe (including Switzerland, France, and Germany) or travelled abroad, for example, as golondrine (seasonal wheat harvesters) to the pampas of...
TABLE 1

Per Cent Female of Total Migrants from Italy by Province 1876-1925*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Per Cent Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piemonte</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liguria</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lombardia</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veneto</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toscana</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marche</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbria</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazio</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abruzzi/Molise</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campania</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puglie</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basilicata</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calabria</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sicilia</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sardegna</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Annuario statistica della emigrazione italiana (Roma, 1926).

Argentina. In Sicily, by contrast, where fewer peasants controlled their own land, and men had effectively excluded women from wage-earning on the large landowners’ commercial estates, women could not so easily feed their families while men were away. Here, more families migrated and sex ratios among migrants were far more balanced overall. It may also be the case that overseas destinations such as the US (and its female industries) offered better opportunities for female employment than did trans-alpine Europe, thus raising women’s migration among the southerners who preferred American over European destinations. In Switzerland

18 Patrizia Audenino, Un mestiere per partire. Tradizione migratoria, lavoro e comunità in una vallata alpina (Milano 1990); Gabaccia, Militants and Migrants, ch 3; her “In the Shadows of the Periphery: Italian Women in the Nineteenth Century,” in Jean Quataert and Marilyn Boxer, eds., Connecting Spheres; Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present (New York 1987).
168 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

and Germany where labourers for construction jobs were in demand, men domi-
nated migration streams. But where landowners in plantation economies experi-
imented with sharecropping schemes to replace slave labour or the “coolie” trade,
as in Brazil and Australia, respectively, whole families of Italians were also more
likely to be recruited.19

The familiar litany of woes pushing Italians from their homeland — over-
population, strained family landholdings, the endless suffering called “miseria,”
collapsing industries or disappearing markets for exported crops — also need to be
gendered as they probably affected men and women differently. We know, for
example, that the decline of a cottage-based textile industry in most of rural Italy
during the late 19th century significantly altered women’s productive work and the
families that depended on their contributions,20 but few have studied the impact
this had on southern family economies, or on the migrations from regions of
collapsing proto-industry. Likely, different patterns of male and female migrations
developed in regions where, as in Calabria in the south, no industrial production of
textiles replaced cottage production, and other regions, such as Biella in the
northwest, where employment in textile factories (much of it female) symbolized
Italy’s entry into the world of industrializing nations. Gender ratios of out-migration
could also change significantly over time. Migrations from southern and central
regions, such as Calabria and the Abruzzi respectively, remained heavily male for
only a period of roughly twenty years, and then either men returned or wives and
children joined them abroad. Here, women’s migration depended largely on men’s
capacity to find wage-earning alternatives to seasonal labour abroad, usually by
landing jobs in urban economies that also provided jobs for semi- and low-skilled
women workers — either in domestic service or the “female industries.” But there
was nothing inevitable about this evolution of male-to-family migration. Trans-
alpine migrations from Italy’s northwest and northeast, for instance, remained male
dominated into the post-World War II era, when men travelled under “guest worker”
schemes.21 A different balance developed in interwar America where, under the
impact of restrictive immigration policies, overall migration from southern and
eastern Europe to the US actually became female dominated. US laws exempted
close family members of naturalized citizens from the harsh quotas if their arrival

19Rene’ Del Fabbro, Transalpini; Italienische Arbeitswanderung nach Süddeutschland im
Kaiserreich 1870-1918 (Osnabrück 1996); Angelo Trento, La dove’ la raccolta del caffè
(Sao Paulo 1989); William A. Douglass, From Italy to Ingham: Italians in North Queensland
(St. Lucia, Queensland 1995).
20Christopher Duggan, A Concise History of Italy (Cambridge 1995), 135; on local studies
of the north, Ramella, Terra e telai; Patrizia Sione, “Industrial Work, Militancy, and
Migrations of Northern Italian Workers in Europe and Paterson, N.J., 1880-1913,” PhD
re-unified families divided by earlier migrations. Many more women than men took advantage of these provisions.²²

_Migration Cultures, Transnational Families_

In areas where male migration persisted over decades or became a permanent feature of Italian men’s incorporation into the capitalist world economy, a culture of migration — what social scientists now call transnationalism — emerged as a way of life for Italian men and women. Scholars have probed the lives of the migratory “men without women.”²³ Largely neglected and woefully misunderstood, however, are the many women who remained behind. The “women who wait”²⁴ and their links to male migrants deserve serious attention. Contrary to popular belief, such women could not always fall back easily on the financial support of male breadwinners abroad or spend the money sent them from overseas. After all, the goal of male migration was usually the creation of surplus savings — the proverbial nest egg intended to finance a better home, more land, and daughters’ dowries — and not the maintenance of idle women and children along bourgeois models.

Linda Reeder’s fine study of a Sicilian village which sent many men abroad suggests ways of theorizing the connections between men “on the move” and the “white widows” (as they were called in 19th-century Sicily) who remained. It illustrates how family economies functioned in a part of Italy where women, during men’s absences, had enormous difficulties finding waged work or pursuing subsistence agriculture as peasants on family lands. Women’s efforts focused on reserving men’s earnings from abroad for the purchase of land and houses for the next generation, and thereby the reproduction of their families and indeed the entire community. Male absences also pushed women into new relationships to the state, as the family and household representative, though what impact such newly forged relations with state, church, and bureaucratic officials had on them remains open for investigation. Reeder’s work also demonstrates how the difficulty of long-distance communication and the anticipation of possible migration (in this case, to


the US) improved attitudes toward female literacy. All this suggests that we cannot treat the women who stayed behind as stock characters leading static lives.25

What remains unclear from Reeder’s work, and from comparable studies of northern Italian regions marked by persistent seasonal male migration to Switzerland, France, and Germany, is the connection between women’s unwaged, subsistence and reproductive work at home and men’s wages earned abroad. As world systems theorists note, employers in developed countries could pay migrant workers (most of whom hailed from peripheral economies) lower wages than “native” workers because migrant workers’ wages did not support the reproduction of the next generation of workers: peasant agriculture and women’s work in the migrant’s home country paid those costs. At the same time, migrant men’s wages, though one-third lower than that of “native-born” workers’, were always considerably higher than could be earned at home.26 But how these transnational family economies actually functioned remains somewhat of a mystery. How did Italian male earnings abroad intersect with women’s activities back home? The particular economic niche that women occupied, whether as peasants, spinners and weavers, workers in proto-industry, housewives, or consumers and managers of family incomes and savings, likely mattered. Knowing how would shed light on the gender negotiations and strategies that informed “family” decisions about migration.

Also under-studied is the relationship between women’s waged work in Italy and men’s waged work abroad. In northern Italy, where subsistence agriculture and industrialization of textile production sometimes went hand-in-hand, divergent patterns emerged. Some women entered the new factories while others took over agricultural duties to provision families; some men found industrial jobs nearby, while many more ventured abroad.27 We also suspect some correlation between family patterns of labour and the presence of male and female activism. Relevant work by US historians suggest that work choices affected the extent and form of women’s participation in unionization and strike activity at home and abroad.28 Nor did female activism occur only in industrial settings. As the managers of family budgets, women often assumed special leadership in tax protests in rural and urban areas.29 During the Sicilian peasant revolts of the 1890s, women played a visible

27 Ramella, Terra e Telai; Audenino, Un Mestiere; Sione, “Industrial Work, Militancy, and Migrations.”
role when their communities occupied estates, demanded better land contracts, and trashed the offices and homes of tax collectors. Unfortunately, women’s role in subsequent forms of activism has received short shrift in Italian labour history, where at best women emerge as junior partners in the formation of northern peasant leagues, the modern labour movements of Piemonte and Lombardia, and the anti-war activism and food riots that preceded the outbreak of World War I.

We would also venture the hypothesis that activism could be linked to the dynamics of male and female emigration and return. A comparative analysis of the interconnections among female work, male migration, and labour activism in the textile industry is especially needed. Indeed, preliminary work on the US reveals intriguing links between Italy’s textile workers and employment in New World centres of Italian anarchist and syndicalist activism such as Paterson, New Jersey. Many of Paterson’s women, not just its men, had been labourers and sometimes activists in Italian textile centres prior to migration.

Working Out: The Domestic Service Conundrum and Other Parables

As labour migrants in the diaspora, Italian women, like men, performed distinctive types of waged work. Significantly, domestic service, the most important motor of female migrations of the 19th and early 20th centuries, never became the major economic niche for Italian women globally that it did for Irish women and, to a lesser extent, women from Norway, Germany, Sweden, Poland, and Finland. Italian women did not categorically shun this work. After agriculture, domestic service was the largest employer of females in Italy until well into the 20th century, and Italian women abroad sometimes worked as laundresses, cooks, and house servants. In Argentina and Brazil they generally constituted the largest group of immigrant domestic servants. Though few remained in their placement, Italian domestics were also recruited by Canada after World War II. Even in the US, where comparatively few Italians took such jobs, most Italian women listing an occupation for Ellis Island record-keepers called themselves domestic servants, though this

30 Gabaccia, Militants and Migrants.
31 Sione, “Industrial Work, Militancy, and Migrations.”
may have reflected the greater respectability accorded domestic as opposed to factory work.  

Still, Italian immigrant women did not cluster in domestic service. Their relative absence from a sector that in many countries became an immigrant female job “ghetto” has not been satisfactorily addressed. Most scholarship deals with the United States and compares the heavy Irish migrations of domestics with Italian women’s limited association with service jobs. It also reveals conflicting interpretations of Italian women’s work patterns, ones that parallel in striking ways the economic versus culturalist explanations of Italian women’s limited migration. In short, either economy or culture produced an Italian “aversion” to domestic service. Some writers stress the belated timing of Italian women’s arrival vis-à-vis Irish women and economic developments in the US. The arrival of large numbers of Italian women, they suggest, coincided with the decline of domestic service as an employer of females generally after the 1870s, and the corresponding rise of “female industries.” Given a choice, Italians opted for the higher wages of the garment and other industries. Others stress the differing composition of the migration streams: the Irish migrated as young single women, in need of residence as well as work, while many more Italian women migrated as wives, mothers, and daughters, that is, as parts of nuclear family migrations. And many scholars have isolated as a critical or contributing factor Italian cultural opposition to women living among “strangers” and the possible threat it posed to female modesty. While such influences probably did operate, again we are struck by the degree to which codes of female honour/shame or male desires to regulate women’s sexuality and mobility are presented as a peculiarly Italian (or southern Italian) trait. It smacks of cultural determinism and reveals a lack of sensitivity to how patriarchy restricted women in other cultures and societies. As for the Italian case, we might begin to work through the economy/culture split by comparing local economies that exhibited different patterns. A comparison of Italian women in New York (where their domestic service profile was low) and Buenos Aires (where they were the largest group of immigrant domestics) or Naples or Palermo (where large numbers worked as domestics) would provide a refreshing way of examining the problem.

Across the diaspora Italian women also worked in significant numbers in agriculture, especially in Argentina, Brazil, southern France, parts of Australia, and certain North American locales, including Louisiana, California, and, to a lesser

34 Gabaccia, “From Minority to Majority,” 94; thanks to our anonymous assessor for reminding us of this point.
extent, British Columbia. Again, differing patterns emerge. In Brazil and Argentina, most worked as members of sharecropping families. Brazil consciously recruited family groups from Italy to replace emancipated slaves who associated work on coffee plantations with slavery and sought to escape waged labour in freedom by turning to subsistence-oriented agriculture. In Argentina, the families of golondrine who had earlier migrated to seasonal harvesting jobs on the pampas relocated en masse, usually in rural wheat-growing regions of the country where they could lease or sharecrop land. They thus combined production of wheat for the market with subsistence agriculture, much as peasant families did in Italy's Po Valley and in parts of the southern grain-growing regions of Apulia and Sicily. Australia's recruitment of Italian families for sharecropping was also informed by racial politics. In response to widespread opposition to the importation of largely male indentured Chinese and Kanaka (Pacific island) seasonal workers to harvest sugar in Queensland's expanding plantations, Australian employers introduced sharecropping and recruited Italian peasant families. They hoped, but did not always succeed, in attracting "whiter" northern Italians. To choose yet another pattern, Italian women in southern France figured among the seasonal agricultural labourers harvesting flowers, saffron, and grapes. Such comparisons alone caution against easy generalizations about Italian women's work patterns, but we also need more closely textured analysis of work settings and their implications for women's daily experiences, family responsibilities, and power. Whether women's work in these varied contexts reproduced or challenged pre-migration gender and class dynamics is a central question that begs for comparative analysis.

In numerical terms, the most important form of waged work for Italian women in the diaspora was factory operative in the garment, textile, cannery, and cigar industries. Italian women themselves identified the fixed hours, higher wages, and "modern environment" that attracted them to these "female industries." In the US, the most studied case, the majority of Italian female factory workers were

---

37 Carina Silberstein, "Labor and Migration in an Agricultural Economy: Italians in Argentina," paper presented at "'For Us There Are No Frontiers,'" Tampa, April 1996; Chiara Vangelista, Le braccia per la fazenda, Immigrati e caipiras nella formazione del mercato del lavoro paulista (1850-1930) (Milano 1982).


40 See the early scattered notes in Forster, Italian Emigration of Our Times.

young single women, usually daughters living at home with their parents. (Unlike Jewish women, the group to which they are usually compared, many young Italian wives also continued working until the birth of their first or second child, or returned to work later in life.) Anecdotal evidence for Canada suggests that here too single daughters dominated the ranks of wage-earning Italian women, at least until World War II. Few Italian women in American cities “opted” for the female boarding houses or other forms of shared accommodation that attracted many turn-of-the-century urban American “working girls.” A pattern of Italian female lodging did emerge elsewhere, including in northern Italian cities and in Switzerland, where employers experimented with paternalistic, Lowell-style dormitory housing for unmarried women textile workers. But the predominant profile was of Italian women workers living at home as daughters in family groups.

Recent scholarship on sexuality shows that single wage-earning women in North America challenged parental control over their labour and free time. While the question whether Italian working girls participated fully in the commercialized amusements of the early 20th century has provoked some disagreement among historians, research shows that Italian working daughters experimented with “American” ways and challenged conventional familial authority. Most turned over their pay packets to their mothers, the organizers of consumption, but they also “earned” allowances enabling them to pursue in limited ways commercial American youth culture, particularly mass-produced “city clothes,” make-up, and movies. Comparative studies of Italians and Jews agree that while Italian girls enjoyed less social autonomy many did succeed in challenging their parents’ customary right to choose a marriage partner. And at least some Italians defied parents by breaking curfews, neglecting after-work house chores, and taking up with “American” friends. In Canada, where studies of the “girl problem” have only begun to appear, historians have uncovered few Italian or immigrant “bad girls.” But the slim evidence suggests that Italian girls who “got into trouble” were more likely to do so within their own households and communities than in the public streets or

nickelodeons. Both consensual sexual relations or rape by male boarders or neighbours, for example, could result in a girl’s incarceration in training school or reformatory.  

*Unwaged Labour Abroad: More or Less Work for Mother?*

**Studies of Italian Women** in the diaspora generally have focused on their wage-earning, yet most migrant women engaged initially in unwaged domestic labour. Scholars have noted the connections between women’s household responsibilities and the spread of industrial homework and “sweatshops,” but we do not know if this pattern was more typical of the US or of Italian industrial communities in Europe or Latin America. Even less understood is how Italian migrant women’s domestic work changed with migration abroad. Some studies have considered the issue by focusing on changing levels of childbearing and fertility, but little is known about housework in rapidly industrializing settings such as New York in the 1910s or Buenos Aires in the 1930s and 1940s. We know that numerous Italian women transformed their housework into waged work by selling their services to male boarders, though they did not define it as “work.” But many related issues require study, including whether city life actually lightened the work load of former peasant women by providing them with running water, modern stoves, and the like. Did modern technology for immigrants, as for women in general, mean “more work for mother,” or did Italians interpret “modern conveniences” differently because their point of reference—rural Italy—was different? Such research promises not only to “add” immigrant women to feminist scholarship on consumption, house-

---


hold technology, and reproduction, but should help us understand why, despite the hardships of migration, Italian women, like other female immigrants, adjusted to their new circumstances. Contemporary work on rural Latin Americans in the US note that women's satisfaction with domestic consumer goods reconciles them to settlement while men dream of returning home.\textsuperscript{52}

We need also to address Italian peasant women's generally unquestioned "power of the purse" in a global economy. North American scholars in particular have shown that women maintained their position as managers of family finances, but few have analyzed how much power, as opposed to responsibility, really resided in that position, or whether its meaning changed abroad. Extant studies are suggestive, however. In Italy, women's financial position was associated with their responsibility for arranging marriages and bargaining the dowries and marriage gifts that provided the material basis for reproducing the next generation, while in North America it more often focused on strategies of consumption for the maintenance of day-to-day life in a two-generation or recently arrived immigrant household. Whether these changed contexts affected women's power and influence over children and wider kinship circles requires further exploration.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Female Protest and Labour Activism}

Perhaps the least understood aspect of Italian women's diasporic lives is their role as resisters, protesters, and activists. Studies of Italian male labourers (as opposed to committed leftists) have noted men's high rates of transiency and occasional fierce workplace militancy coupled with their general indifference to formal labour organization and politics.\textsuperscript{54} By contrast, few works on immigrant women's activism actually isolate Italians for in-depth investigation. Scholars have tended to compare Italian female militancy to that of more politicized women, and have found Italians

\begin{itemize}
  \item Gabaccia, \textit{From Sicily to Elizabeth Street}; Sturino, \textit{Forging the Chain}; Iacovetta, \textit{Such Hard Working People}.
\end{itemize}
wanting. In the well-developed US literature, writers have differentiated between the activism and union leadership of Irish and Jewish women in female industry and Italian women's comparative reluctance to join campaigns and their occasional strike-breaking. The explanations, moreover, have drawn on familiar notions of Italian women's vulnerability to a patriarchal Latin culture.  

We are not questioning that Italian women workers in early 20th century US cities were "less militant" than their Jewish counterparts. The 1909 New York garment workers' strike is a case in point. Similarly, in Chicago and New York, the Women's Trade Union League, an alliance of female trade unionists and sympathetic middle-class women, produced several prominent immigrant women leaders in the garment trades, but none of them Italian.  

Rather, we caution against static snapshots of militancy and note Italian women's pivotal role in later strikes and class-conscious activism. The US evidence suggests that Italian female militancy grew over the course of the 20th century and was closely linked with overlapping ethnic loyalties and networks of family and community. Italian women's activism increased as Italian men's membership in unions, and especially in the Industrial Workers of the World, increased — suggesting that the IWW's mass-based form of industrial organization effectively tapped into the discontents and demands of whole communities.  

Studies of immigrant communities on strike — including the textile communities of Lawrence, Massachusetts and the cigar factory neighbourhoods of Tampa, Florida — reveal Italian women as aggressive street fighters, rent strikers, and food boycotters — what Ardis Cameron calls "radicals of the worst sort."  

Like other women committed to their working-class communities, Italian housewives and daughters in mining and industrial towns across North America engaged in class-conscious forms of resistance and protest. A depression-era community "relief strike" in Welland, Ontario witnessed tremendous cross-ethnic class solidarity, which second-generation Italian-Canadian women played a role in nurturing. A postwar women's strike in the same region saw Italian women marching and chanting on the picket-line and joining the human...
blockade preventing vehicles from entering the factory. Such findings suggest too that studies of working women’s respectability consider closely distinctions based on race/ethnicity and culture.\(^5^9\)

Although a minority, Italian-American women did become labour organizers. During the 1930s in East Harlem, New York, such activists emerged within the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), where they enjoyed the support of Italian male co-unionists and invoked a metaphor of community to organize the women of their neighbourhoods. (Such ethnic solidarities between Italian women and men did not preclude ongoing gender conflicts, and indeed the patronizing practices of Italian male leftists also require scrutiny.) Some Italian women organizers remained in their communities; others, including Angela Bambace, abandoned the ILGWU’s Italian-American “enclave” to organize African-American, Hispanic, and other minority women, in this case, in Baltimore.\(^6^0\) Portraits of radical Italian women anywhere in the diaspora are all too rare. Throughout the Italian-speaking world, small communities of anarchists, syndicalists, and socialists took root, producing newspapers, a rich cultural scene, and organizers. Yet, we know almost nothing about the women who inhabited and contributed to these communities, or those who, like Virgilia D’Andrea, belonged to a network of Italian militants who criss-crossed the globe, forging alliances with comrades in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere.\(^6^1\) Of course, such women were in the minority and economic or cultural arguments could be invoked to explain that fact.\(^6^2\) Far more important, however, is to begin to recover the history of Italian female leftists worldwide, in order to understand their place in the history of the less-active majority.

Beyond individuals, we need also to document and compare Italian women’s activism across the globe. Studies of the garment or textile mills of Argentina and France could prove fertile ground for testing the hypothesis, based on US work, that Italian women’s militancy was linked to ethnic solidarities with men. Indeed, an obvious place to start is countries where — unlike the USA, Canada, and Australia — Italians played leading roles in creating national labour movements or encouraging internationalist models. In late-19th century Argentina, Italian immigrant


\(^{6^0}\) Jennifer Guglielmo, “Italian Women’s Workplace Organizing Strategies” paper presented to Canadian Historical Association, St Catherines, June 1996.


\(^{6^2}\) An economic argument might explain it as a logical consequence of women’s concentration in sectors outside the heavily capitalized male-dominated industries where left and labour movements usually flourished; a cultural argument would invoke the Latin bogeyman.
radicals figured prominently among labour leaders and influenced the country's nascent national labour movement generally along anarchist and syndicalist lines. Italian anti-fascist radicals in inter-war France and Belgium helped strengthen and expand ties between Italian immigrants and national working-class movements influenced by left ideologies. Italian men gained a reputation for labour militancy and by the 1930s became the backbone of anti-fascist, often Communist, initiatives. Did Italian men's heightened labour activism in these locales affect Italian women's militancy? If so, did it differ from the few comparable North American examples, such as Ybor City, Florida? Preliminary work shows that Italian women textile workers in interwar Buenos Aires and Rosario, Argentina exhibited fierce activism, but fuller analyses are needed. A comparison of US, French, and Argentine cases would help to discern the factors encouraging or discouraging female militancy in labour movements as different as the reform movements of the Anglo-American world, the social democratic movements of Germany and Switzerland, and the anarchist and syndicalist movements of Latin America.

**Migration, Nationalisms, and Gendering National Identities**

How FOREIGNERS acquire national identities and begin participating in the state as citizens invariably arises in studies of migratory workers. Did men and women initially possess different types of regional or national identity? Before the creation of an Italian national state, men and women presumably had family, kin, communal, and perhaps regional identities. Even after 1861, few men, and fewer women, spoke the "national" language and fewer women than men attained the level of education that would have exposed them to the history essential to the creation or mythologizing of an Italian people. Diaspora studies suggest that migrants often "became Italians" while abroad, where they met "Italians" from other regions and came to understand that receiving nations viewed them all as one Italian race. It might well be that men underwent a process of "becoming Italian" abroad while women maintained regional and local loyalties at home.

But if women in Italy resisted the incursion of the new nation-state until the 20th century, their relationship to it was not unchanging. As Reeder shows, "white widows" represented their households to the local governments that symbolized the nation-state, and even turned to the national government in Rome with concrete requests, such as locating a missing husband. Probably the chief factor forcing the

---


65 Silberstein, "Becoming Visible."
question of national identification on Italian men and women was fascism. In a context of diminished migrations and aggressive demands for loyalty and participation in a unified nation and fatherland, fascism compelled many men and women to come to terms with their identities as Italians. De Grazia’s work outlines the gendered dimensions of Mussolini’s program—he wanted virile and masculine workers and soldiers but from women, loyalty as mothers and biological reproducers—and explores how northern urban women negotiated these demands. Still to be explored are the rural areas where most Italian men and women still lived, and that produced most postwar emigration.

We know even less about the nationalization of Italian men and women abroad. Rates of naturalization among Italian immigrants remained quite low into the 1930s, though they were slightly higher in France than in the US or Canada. For the US, we know too that immigrant men fought in disproportionate numbers as soldiers during both world wars, and oral histories with men born into immigrant families in the 1920s date World War II as a defining moment in their self-identity as patriotic Americans. Citizenship, it appears, was not a pressing issue until war forced questions of national loyalty on Italian citizens, especially during World War II, when so many countries were at war against the homeland.

By contrast, in many receiving countries in the early 20th century immigrant women’s citizenship changed automatically with that of husbands, and their relationship to new states could be quite different from men’s. In the US, Americanization programs for men stressed civics (the moral, and republican, lessons of George Washington’s life) and political responsibilities of citizenship, while those for women taught the skills of American domesticity—consumption, childrearing, cooking, and housekeeping—suggesting that Americanizers, much like Mussolini, expected national loyalties from women as mothers and wives more than as voters or politically active citizens. Some similar observations can be made about the gendered nature of Canadianization programs in this period.

Nor can we ignore the racial status of women who belonged to those “in-between peoples” that since the turn of the century have composed a significant proportion of North America’s working classes. Recent work suggests that south and east European workers saw their economic integration into North America as simultaneously a racial process of disassociation from the most marginalized and despised minorities, Blacks and Asians. Italian women and men likely shared a desire to “become white” but their experiences probably differed. Immigrant women, like Black women, were constructed as exotic and erotic, or, alternatively, as neglectful or ignorant mothers. Exploring how Italian women negotiated this

66 De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, 1-16.
67 Gabaccia and Ottanelli, “Diaspora or International Proletariat?”
terrain and how they sought to transform themselves into "Americans" should lead us into fruitful analyses of the gender and racial politics of sexuality, morality, marriage, and motherhood.  

Conclusion

Our dismay at the neglect of women and gendered analyses in migration and diaspora studies prompted us to begin the work of gendering and theorizing connections suggested by the literature on Italian migration. Women, we have insisted, do not stand outside categories such as transnationalism and international proletariat, even when they are not migrants. Even a largely male diaspora cannot be properly understood without attention to the women who stay behind and the transnational family economies and communities that link people across oceans and continents. More particularly, we suggest some new ways of thinking about Italian immigrant working women. We now take the next logical step of continuing our international project, which is intended not solely to address our queries or hypotheses but to offer a forum for exchanging research findings and encouraging international comparison. We are also excited about the potential of projects like ours to rewrite world history from the vantage point of women, workers, and humble migrant peoples rather than from the lofty heights of "civilizations," "world systems," or the "international relations" of states through warfare or diplomacy.

Our thanks to Natalie Davis, Ian Radforth, Mariana Valverde, Greg Kealey, Craig Heron, and the Toronto Labour Studies Group for their valuable input during earlier phases of this work. We also gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments of an anonymous reader at Labour/Le Travail, whose suggestions for improvement we often happily adopted.

FROM SUNBELT TO SNOWBELT: 
FILIPINOS IN CANADA

Anita Beltran Chen, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Lakehead University

ABOUT THE BOOK: The Philippines has been consistently ranked as one of the top ten source countries of immigrants to Canada since the 1970s. Despite the fact that the Filipino Canadian community is growing at an accelerated rate, only limited attention has been devoted to the study of this particular ethnocultural group. This collection of the author’s published articles and conference papers about Filipino Canadians was researched over a span of eighteen years. Part one consists of six essays which focus on the Filipino Canadians and, to a lesser extent, the Filipino Americans. The five essays in part two treat Filipino Canadians as a subgroup of larger studies including immigrants from other selected Asian countries. The book serves dual purposes; it contributes to the growing literature on ethnicity in Canada and it lays the groundwork to stimulate further research on the Filipino Canadians.

EXCERPT FROM FOREWORD: "... The book ... is a result of detailed work over the years that has attempted to carefully assess the status of one of the most interesting Asian groups in Canada, the Filipinos ... Up to now, there has been no major, systematic sociological work in the English language ... Anita Chen’s essays go a long way to fill this gap ... essays vividly show ... that immigration to Canada has to be understood differently from the traditional way in which scholars and researchers have viewed the streams of immigration in the past ... It shows the value of placing a case study of a community into a broader context ... so as to bring out its common features and its uniqueness."

Wsevolod W. Isajiw, 
Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto 
Director- Robert F. Harley Professorship and Program in Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies

ORDERING INFORMATION
Copies are available at a cost of $20.00 per copy (includes GST and delivery). Orders and inquiries should be directed to:
CANADIAN ETHNIC STUDIES JOURNAL
University of Calgary 
2500 University Drive N.W. 
Calgary, Alberta 
T2N 1N4 
jcleaver@acs.ucalgary.ca 
tel- (403) 220-7257 
fax- (403) 284-5467