THE EMERGENCE OF A CLASS OF INFORMED, WORKING ITALIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Though Italian husbands, wives, and their children worked together in a clearly defined hierarchy that promoted the success of the family as whole, mass migration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century drastically altered the traditional roles of Italian daughters, which shifted as they encountered the economic realities in America. Immigration to the United States, specifically to large, industrial cities such as New York between the years of 1890 and 1920, facilitated widespread employment out of the home and created educational opportunities for the daughters of Italian immigrants. These factors permitted the development of a new class of informed, working citizens who used their newfound education and freedom to establish a place in society. Humble origins in menial labor venues liberated Italian immigrant daughters from traditional roles within in a strict family hierarchy and situated them on a track that led to economic, educational, and social liberties that they never could have gained through life in Southern Italy. These developments compromised traditional Italian family structures and values: as a result, the traditional family structure evaporated and the power dynamics of the family shifted severely, effectively eradicating the family model set forth by families in Southern Italy.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, a typical Southern Italian family fit into a defined mold that strictly regulated all family members’ roles. The men of the family occupied the position of utmost authority, dominating the family dynamic. They provided an income for the family by way of their trade or through the sale of goods raised on their farmland.1 The father led the clan: he made important decisions that affected the well-being of the family unit. These decisions determined the family income, expenditures, and future. One Italian son from Southern Italy claimed, “[The] father in the family was like the teacher, and everything he said we had to do.”2 This account represented the blind compliance

2 Stave and Sutherland, 247.
demanded by fathers in Southern Italian families. Though lower than the husband in the familial hierarchy, Southern Italian wives had an extremely important role in the family.

Italian wives ruled over the domain of the home. Wives retained control over the household chores and child-rearing. Women had an instrumental role in the family: their influence over the children and their regulation of the home’s daily functioning rendered them indispensable to the Southern Italian family unit. Despite these facts, Italian wives lived in complete subordination to their husbands. Children also occupied a distinct role in the family.

The typical family dynamic consisted of children who were completely obedient to the desires and needs of the family. According to an account that described a typical patriarchal Italian home, “Children had no rights, only duties.”3 Parents required that their children aid the family by working in the home and/or contributing their earned income to the family. The family depended on the children for help in the fields, in the home, or for their wages. As sons grew older, they helped their fathers and garnered a degree of freedom unbeknownst to their sisters. Sons frequented the town square, played sports with other boys in the area, and attended functions such as dances with little or no supervision.4 Meanwhile, female children rarely left the domain of the home, as their duties to their family and their position in society limited their engagement in their world.

In the early twentieth century, Southern Italian girls remained steadfastly at their mothers’ sides, as they assisted in the daily maintenance of the home and the duties associated with the success of a household. Female children passed their limited leisure time with other females in the town. They washed laundry together, mended clothing in groups, and viewed each other at town gatherings, markets, church services, and festivals. In small villages of southern Italy, fathers, brothers, and neighbors constantly supervised young

3 Stave and Sutherland, 246.
4 Stave and Sutherland, 244.
women, which protected them from male advances and compromising situations. Young females depended entirely on their family for support, protection, and stability in their society. Women did not have the ability to find vocations and did not regularly attend school. Young Italian females needed to marry so as to secure a future. Thus, through marriage, the female child of an Italian family transitioned from the role of executive assistant to that of director of household affairs. This cycle maintained the subordinate status of Southern Italian women in their families and in their society. Mass immigration to the United States would drastically change the position of women in society.

From the 1870s to the 1920s several million Italians migrated from the terrain of Southern Italy to the Americas. This mass migration occurred as a result of influential and strenuous economic, political, and social factors that persuaded Italians to abandon their lives for a chance to improve their situation on American soil. The agricultural depression in Southern Italy served as one of the most significant motivations for emigration to America. Crops repeatedly failed, year after year. The production of major exports such as olive oil decreased due to disease in the crops. Wages decreased to the point of poverty and the fishing trade came to a standstill due to the death of commerce. Cash was nonexistent in the region. This halted trade and production to the point at which the prefetto of Genoa claimed, “The cost of oil and other items is so high that people are forced to leave for overseas to avoid starvation.” The negative impacts on Southern Italian society occurred during a period of astounding industrial growth in the United States. Though the Italian emigrants did not possess the exact facts and figures of available jobs and wages in America, historians such as Enrico Moretti suggest that, “Migration occurs when the expected present value of earnings

5 Stave and Sutherland, 244.
7 Cinel, 186.
8 Cinel, 186.
from migrating, net of transportation costs and weighted by the different probabilities of employment in the destination country and at home is positive. Migrants choose as a destination country the one with the largest wage premium net of transportation costs and probability of employment. Based upon the example of the first pioneers that traveled to America and returned with a plentitude of money, many Southern Italians perceived the United States as a land of economic opportunity that would solve their economic woes. This fact, in conjunction with the rise of steamship travel that made transatlantic migration simple, quick, and economical, rendered the United States as a prime destination for Southern Italian emigrants. Economic motivations coincided with the political undertones that encouraged Southern Italian immigration to America.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Italy competed with European imperialist masters such as Great Britain and France who extended their control overseas through the cultivation of colonies that existed to benefit their parent countries. Italy attempted to colonize lands in Northern Africa – Libya, Eritrea, and Benadir – yet failed to overcome African resistance. As a result, the Italian Prime Minister Francesco Crispi decided to “cultivate emigrants as Italian agents abroad.” This political position on emigration held that permanent Italian settlements abroad enhanced Italy’s opportunities for global trade and representation. Crispi knew that Italy would benefit from the establishment of Italian immigrants overseas, in places like the United States, and set up foundations and charities to support emigration. Italian immigrants in the United States sent money, goods, and information back to Southern Italy, thereby supplementing the failing economy in the region. Crispi’s intentions were not innocent: he wanted to degrade the overall growth of the

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10 Mark I Choate, "From Territorial to Ethnographic Colonies and Back Again: The Politics of Italian Expansion, 1890-1912," *Modern Italy* 8: 1 (2003), 65.
11 Choate, 66.
12 Choate, 67.
13 Choate, 68.
United States by decreasing available employment for its citizens. Southern Italian labor in the States limited working opportunities for Americans in the States. His plan worked: Southern Italians flocked to the United States.

The work of emigration agents aided in the promotion of mass emigration to America. In Southern Italy, where literacy levels were lower than that of Northern Italy, emigration agents displayed posters in communal areas that encouraged emigration and presented speeches that described the benefits of emigration at festivals and other town functions. These posters and speeches educated prospective emigrants and provided them with information about the economic and social benefits associated with emigration to America, as well as the details of transportation that would take them to America. These agents worked for government and private agencies that sought to profit from the mass emigration of Italians to America. Due to repeated crop failure, the economic situation in Southern Italy was dreadful. Emigration of burdensome citizens who could not successfully farm, feed themselves, or support a successful economy guaranteed two positive factors: a decrease of the number of people that would become wards of the state and the likelihood that immigrants would send money back to Southern Italy, which would bolster the economy. These emigration persuasions, which derived their inception from political agendas within the Italian government, flourished with the help of social factors that encouraged emigration to the United States.

Chain migration was a social phenomenon that contributed to the continuation of mass migration from Southern Italy to the United States between the years 1890 and 1920. Chain migration involved the migration of immigrants from one centralized location to an established area or community due to the influence of and/or the familial connection to immigrants that previously conducted the aforementioned journey. The phenomenon of chain

\[14\text{ Cinel, 188.}\]
\[15\text{ Cinel, 186.}\]
migration evolved out of the struggling financial climate of Southern Italy and the communicative capabilities of peoples living between the years of 1890 and 1920.

The traditional migratory pattern of middle and lower-class emigrants from Southern Italy involved the migration of the father, the self-proclaimed strongest, most capable worker of the family, to a new destination – for example, New York City. The eldest son remained at home with the mother of the family. This son executed the agricultural duties or conducted the business of family in the absence of the father. Ideally, the father found a job in New York City, saved a small amount of money, and sent funds back home for the payment of household expenses and the passage across the Atlantic of the younger son(s) and daughter(s). These younger children, upon arrival in New York City, had to work to contribute to the family economy: they found jobs working in factories or held odd jobs that bolstered the stockpile of family funds. This process of chain migration continued until each of the children arrived in America. The mother and infants voyaged to America in the final stages of chain migration. Oftentimes, the eldest son remained in the ancestral nation so as to sell the family holdings and completed the cycle of chain migration when he joined the rest of his family in New York City. This process of chain migration, including the circulation of finances from New York City to the hills of Southern Italy, is evident through the investigative journalism of Broughton Brandenburg, a reporter for the New York Times.

In 1904, Brandenburg conducted an investigation into the lives of Italian Immigrants. The author and his wife traveled to Italy and returned to America as immigrants would, in steerage in the garb of poor American immigrants, and lived in an Italian neighborhood in New York City. The journalist learned of the typical patterns of migration from his companions in steerage, who detailed the account of the long separation of family members.

16 Choate, 67.
17 Choate, 67.
that occurred whilst working members saved for the migration of other members. Based upon
the information Brandenburg gathered from personal interviews during his two transatlantic
crossings and his sojourn in a Southern Italian village (which remained unnamed throughout
the document), he calculated that between $70,000 and $100,000 traveled across the ocean
from America to Southern Italy in the course of a year. \textsuperscript{19} These facts and figures demonstrate
the prevalence of chain migration. Native Italians journeyed to and from America between
1890 and 1904. Chain migration gained popularity and additional adherents with each letter,
story, or immigrant that made its way back to Southern Italy from America. Thus, family
members and acquaintances in Southern Italy learned of the opportunities for wealth and
power in America. As a result, the people of Southern Italy, from the larger towns to the rural
villages, came down with “America fever.” \textsuperscript{20} In the midst of economic hardship and the
prospect of a bleak, impoverished future, the promise of America and its riches motivated
Southern Italians to begin the process of migration to America.

Though chain migration transported millions of Italians to the United States by 1920,
the number of Italians on American soil was not sufficient to guard and maintain the
traditional family structure prevalent in Southern Italy. As Southern Italian immigrant
daughters adjusted to life in New York City from 1890 to 1920, their encounter with the
economic opportunities for women precipitated profound changes in the role of women in the
family and supported the growth of a new group of educated, capable, working women.

Immigration to the United States from Southern Italy increased the demands that the
family unit expected of their daughters. In the climate of New York City between the years
1890 and 1920, many Italian daughters worked more than one job in addition to completing
their household duties. Southern Italian immigrants expected their daughters to work

\textsuperscript{19} Brandenburg, 1.
\textsuperscript{20} Cinel, 186.
assiduously in the home. Their duties included, but were not limited to, cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, laundering, and serving as executive assistant to the mother of the family.

The mother typically reigned in her home, rarely working outside the home if she arrived as a married woman when she immigrated to the United States.\(^{21}\) Life in New York City isolated many of these wives, who had enjoyed many more liberties when they lived in Southern Italy. In many cases, these women lived in rural towns and villages that depended upon small trade shops and agriculture for income. Wives worked alongside their husbands in small shops or they toiled in the fields if the finances of the family were poor and demanded the assistance of the wife in the fields. These women lived close to each other, oftentimes walking to the water supply together, doing their laundry as they gossiped, and allowing their children to play in communal areas.\(^{22}\) These interactions permitted the development of relationships between women that facilitated the exchange of ideas, child-rearing information, recipes, and other beneficial information that would help a rural, Southern Italian wife. Such interaction outside of the home was not available to Southern Italian immigrant wives when they came to America, specifically to live in New York City with their families. These women seldom found employment and interaction outside of the home.\(^{23}\)

Rather, Italian mothers worked inside the home. In addition to performing domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and handling child-rearing, they took in boarders and finished small sewing projects at home to contribute to the family income. The plethora of duties that they needed to finish confined them to small apartments and left little time for socialization. In a 1905 census conducted in New York City, statistics found that only six percent of immigrant Italian households included wives that found employment outside of the


\(^{22}\) Foner, 120.

\(^{23}\) Foner, 120 – 121.
home. Unlike their daughters, who benefitted from the social advantages of employment outside of the home, Italian immigrant wives bore their responsibilities in relative isolation. The Italian immigrant daughter had an important relationship to her mother; if the mother could not provide a substantial contribution to the income of the family, then her daughter, as her “executive assistant,” had to seek employment outside of the home so as to supplement the efforts of the mother. Italian immigrant wives and daughters struggled to bring income to the family, though the family unit did not demand all of these services from their sons.

Sons of Southern Italian immigrant families enjoyed many liberties unbeknownst to their female siblings. Sons had more free time: their families permitted them to “roam the streets, play sports, and seek adventures with their friends.” In terms of education, Italian families were more likely to invest in the education of their sons as opposed to that of their daughters because they believed their sons had a greater capacity for education. Statistics from a New York Times article written in March of 1910 corroborate this statement: the article stated that only one Italian female student was present in an immigrant classroom of fifty-eight. The school described in this article was strictly an immigrant school, designed to teach children the basics of English before they entered the New York Public School System. Though legislation at the time stated that primary education was compulsory for children, thousands of young Italian immigrant females did not attend and thus did not receive entry-level education provided by immigrant schools. As a result, they did not have sufficient English to participate in the public school system, which left many bereft of primary and secondary education. In lieu of formal education, Italian immigrant daughters developed skills pertinent to their occupation.

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24 Foner, 121.
25 Foner, 112.
26 Foner, 113.
Girls working in factories needed to be able to operate machinery, count spools of thread, and execute deft work that required a great deal of hand-eye coordination.\(^\text{29}\) While these skills did not constitute a formal education, the fundamental concepts associated with the skills could be applied in various life situations. For example, if a factory immigrant worker could count spools of thread, then she would also know how many zucchinis she needed to bring home for her mother to cook for dinner and she would be able to count the number of candidates running for president. Though these examples are seemingly simple, these small skills greatly advanced Italian immigrant women living in New York City from 1890 to 1920. Their counterparts in Southern Italy did not always benefit from such a basic education. After immigration to New York City, many Italian sons remained in school while daughters labored within and outside the home all day long for the welfare of their family.\(^\text{30}\)

Due to the economic constraints faced by Southern Italian immigrant families in the United States, their daughters needed to find additional employment outside of the home so as to earn wages to support their family’s new life in America. These daughters easily found employment in factories. By 1905 in New York City, 62 percent of single Italian-born women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one were wage earners. These women worked in a variety of different fabrication centers, which included garment, candy, tobacco, and jewelry factories.\(^\text{31}\) These factory jobs were difficult, dangerous, and did not contribute to complete economic independence of young immigrant women. In 1910, the New York State Factory Investigation Committee found that Italian immigrant daughters earned approximately between six and nine dollars a week; these wages fell below the ten dollar minimum required to meet a minimal standard of living.\(^\text{32}\) Between the years of 1890 and 1910, many Italian immigrant daughters continued to comply with the traditional gender roles

\(^{30}\) Foner, 112.
\(^{31}\) Foner, 111.
\(^{32}\) Foner, 112.
that family life reinforced in Southern Italy. These girls obeyed their parents, gave their parents their paychecks, and essentially worked without pay for the benefit of their family. During this period of time, an Italian garment worker, Amalia Morandi, stated, “I gave my pay envelope to my mother. I wouldn’t dare open it up.”\footnote{Morandi quoted in Foner, 112.} In an interview of an Italian immigrant factory girl conducted by Luisa Cetti in 1980, the immigrant remembered, “Davo tutta la paga a mia madre perché era lei ‘tutto’ in casa.”\footnote{Louisa Cetti, "Donne Italiane a New York e Lovoro a Domicilo (1910 – 1925)," \textit{Movimento Operaio e Socialista} 7: 3 (1984), 293.} She stated that she gave the entire sum of her paycheck to her mother because her mother was always in the home. In a sense, the mother was the home. With the house to maintain and the children to mind, she did not have the same earning capacity as her daughters. Together, mothers and their daughters worked together to run and fund the home. These girls sacrificed their time and freedom, in addition to their safety, to work in these factories and contribute towards the support of their families.

The factories that they worked in were sweatshops: lighting was dim, conditions were painstakingly uncomfortable, the hours of a full shift were seemingly endless, and the enclosed spaces were so congested that breathing was a difficult feat.\footnote{Foner, 113.} Many girls suffered from illnesses at work, for if they remained at home to recover, they were likely to lose their job.\footnote{O’Hare, 1.} In 1904, Kate Richards O’Hare, a writer for the socialist newspaper \textit{An Appeal to Reason}, interviewed a sickly factory worker, Roselie Randazzo, just hours before her death. During the interview Randazzo described the factory environment: “Oh, so cold! It hurts me.”\footnote{O’Hare, 1.} Merely hours later, Roselie Randazzo died of a hemorrhage at a local hospital. In addition to health hazards, safety threats endangered female factory workers.
Employers locked factory doors after the beginning of the work day and fire escapes served a nominal purpose. Italian immigrant daughters in the work force also had to endure the unjust working conditions set forth by their employers. A litany of unreasonable fines and wage deductions plagued the average female worker. For example, if a worker was five minutes late to work, that tardiness cost an hour’s pay. Employers also deducted fines from wages in the event of a mistake on a garment, and in some instances, workers even had to cover the cost of the thread that they used to sew garments.38 Southern Italian immigrant daughters bore these conditions with relatively little complaint because they were used to fulfilling a subservient position in life; their families, as well as their employers, viewed them as second class citizens and treated them as such. Southern Italian immigrant daughters had to bear these unfortunate working conditions because few vocational venues were open to them and they desperately needed income.

The few respectable jobs open to women at the time were that of a factory worker, cook, housemaid, and waitress.39 Work outside of the factory exposed women to work environments that could be dangerous. Positions of employment that left women in the company of strangers posed as a threat to their safety. Adalgisa Pichini Franchi, an Italian American living in New York City, claimed that her mother would not let her work in a restaurant because “it wasn’t the right kind of place, nice girls didn’t work there.”40 Because Southern Italian immigrants brought their traditional family values with them when they immigrated to the United States, reputation maintained an extremely important role in their lives. Italian daughters needed to have a respectable reputation so that they could marry well and retire to the domestic realm. Life in a small ethnic enclave guaranteed that if any incident occurred to jeopardize the chastity of a young woman, her chances of marriage evaporated. In

38 Foner, 113.
an ethnic enclave gossip was prevalent and deadly to a young woman’s future. Regardless of the possible dangers of employment, Italian daughters worked outside the home because their wages accounted for a significant portion of the family income.

A 1911 Bureau of Labor study outlined the total income of the average Italian immigrant family. This study demonstrated that Italian working daughters earned approximately 40 percent of their family’s yearly income. This is an astounding percentage, especially when considering that the full time wages of an immigrant female who worked in a factory would confine her to an economic status well under that of the poverty line. Thus, Italian immigrant daughters worked well beyond full time hours so as to contribute to the support of their families. Louisa Trentino, a seventeen-year-old garment worker living in New York City, increased her wages by working until 8:30 P.M. three nights each week. This extra work escalated her income by a meager fifty cents. This dramatically small increase in wages marked the brutal labor and time commitment that Southern Italian immigrant daughters dedicated towards the economic support of their families. The sense of familial obligation that these daughters learned as children in Southern Italy left them with little choice than to sacrifice their health, wealth, and well-being to their family. While their brothers divided their time between work and school and their mothers labored to maintain the proper function of the home, the fathers of immigrant daughters were not always able to secure consistent and profitable employment.

Thus, in many instances, immigrant daughters served as the primary, most consistent breadwinners for their struggling families. Employers did not consider Southern Italian men as the most desirable employees: they were not highly educated and, at the time, were not considered as white workers and faced the racial prejudices of many employers.

42 Foner, 112.
43 Foner, 113.
44 Foner, 143.
Italian immigrant men did have strength and durability to offer to a job; however, they arrived after the waves of thousands of other immigrants – such as the Irish – occupied positions that required brute strength. As a result, many of the Southern Italian immigrant men found work doing odd jobs and often faced uncertain terms of unemployment. In the case of Louisa Trentino, her father found occasional employment as a hod carrier. Her father’s inconsistent unemployment placed a tremendous amount of additional pressure and responsibility on her shoulders, for her wages – like those of countless other Southern Italian immigrant daughters in New York City – served as the primary source of income for the family. The inability of the father to consistently provide financial support for his family dramatically compromised the traditional role that the daughter occupied in Southern Italy before immigration to the United States and contributed towards the breakdown of the traditional Southern Italian family structure.

Economic necessity forced young female Italian immigrant daughters to work upon arrival to the United States. Their families motivated this entry into the workforce, for without their economic contribution, the family would have struggled to survive. However, entry into the workforce initiated a chain reaction of factors that compromised the success of the traditional Italian family structure in the United States. As work brought the females out of the home and away from the supervision of family members and close neighbors, females cultivated their independence in a variety of different ways that angered the rest of the family unit. Rosa Fatino, an Italian immigrant woman living in New York City, summarized the strain placed upon familial relationships as a result of her work in a factory: “The hardest part of being a woman is being strong. [The men] didn't always like it. But I'm proud of it.”

By 1910, a working Italian immigrant daughter in the United States gained relative control over her friends, her union involvement, her purchases, fashion, and romantic

45 Foner, 113.
relationships. Authority over these areas of life marked a fundamental shift away from the traditional Southern Italian family structure. In the United States, fathers no longer had complete control over their daughters and mothers lost the assistance of their daughters as they ventured out after work to enjoy diversions of the time. Parents perceived a great loss of control over their children. Unable to adapt to the newfound social status of their daughters, fathers suffered from emotional and reactionary paralysis.47 The interaction between the independence of daughters with the old world definition of manhood (la pazienza) threatened their identity. Men could not stop their daughters from working, as the loss of their wages would jeopardize the family. They could do nothing to avert the development of their daughters’ independence, which flourished after 1910. Though Italian immigrant daughters worked in unfavorable, strenuous conditions and bore the censure of their family for pursuing their independence, the benefits garnered from widespread employment out of the home rendered their labor worthwhile.

The ability of daughters to work outside the home facilitated the development of a variety of relationships that broadened their educational sphere and allotted them more control over their personal lives. Work outside of the home brought young women into contact with each other. On the way to and from work, as well as during precious break time, women conversed, exchanging ideas and knowledge far from the watchful eyes of their elders. These conversations created friendships and alliances among working daughters of many cultures. These bonds proved to be important as young immigrant women in the workplace organized and protested for better working conditions and benefits. In November of 1909, a group of 20,000 garment workers walked off their jobs to protest the strenuous, dangerous jobs that they worked for menial pay. Women joined in the march, publicly

striking for improvement. Through these alliances, cultural and social information bridged the gap between the different females in the workplace.

When able, female workers engaged in discussions of modernity, romance, men, and family. Influenced and encouraged by their peers, many of these young Italian women violated traditional concepts of womanhood, known in Italian to be *la serietà* (seriousness), and deigned to wear makeup when outside of the home. Young women also developed a taste in fashion for very shrewd reasons. Many factory girls purchased flashy, fashion-forward frocks for two purposes: to secure the attention and approval of their employers and to benefit from the dinner and movie invitations of young men. By wearing attractive clothing, girls found work faster and maintained their positions. As one New York City garment worker claimed in 1902, “A girl who does not dress well is stuck in a corner, even if she is pretty.” Proper hygiene, personal grooming, and attractiveness were not nearly as important as arriving at a job interview in fashionable clothing. This clothing indicated to employers that Americanization already washed over the immigrants, molding the girls into the picture of the ideal worker that the employer sought for his business: this ideal worker was pretty, clean, and well dressed in American fashions. Well-dressed females who embraced fashion also benefited from flattering male attention.

Men treated well-dressed factory girls to shows and dinners that the girls could not afford on their own salaries. One female worker affirmed, “Them clothes has saved us some money a'ready--got us free dinners an' free shows--an'll save us more.” The degree of

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49 Foner, 114.
liberty that young Southern Italian immigrant female workers adopted with their fashion habits exhibited a fundamental transformation in identity.

To purchase luxuries such as attractive clothing, makeup, and romance novels, young female immigrant Italians ended the practice of contributing their entire paycheck to the family. The act of taking money from their paychecks represented divergence from the typical behavior found in the Southern Italian family mold. Traditionally, young women contributed all of their wages to the family income, sacrificing their needs and desires for the benefit of the family. Such was the tradition gender role that these Italian immigrant daughters learned from their mothers and grandmothers when they were children. After 1910, Italian daughters no longer forfeited their basic needs for those of the family; instead, they purchased trifles and clothing, and enjoyed the profits of their labor. Some women spent as much as twenty-five percent of their income on clothing.\footnote{Laughlin, 147.} These developments represented a deep-seated psychological change in the psyche of Italian immigrant daughters. In the first twenty years of the twentieth century, these women realized their value in the household and in the workforce and sought to capitalize on their efforts. The fascination with fashion, style, and material wealth demonstrated the gradual Americanization of Southern Italian immigrant daughters. The phenomenon of Americanization coincided with the growing sentiment of independence among young Italian immigrant women.

Immigration and employment in New York City gave Southern Italian immigrant daughters greater freedoms in their personal lives. Carmela, an Italian immigrant woman living in New York City in 1908, explained that as a child, “[I] did not wander. A woman’s place was at home.”\footnote{Mondello, 113.} Daughters passed most of their time in the home, which virtually guaranteed their chaste behavior. As Bishop E.M. Dunne reported in The Ecclesiastical Review, which was published in New York in 1913, “Rarely did [I] hear of an Italian girl
going astray.”  In Italy, women did not engage in conversation or spend time in the company of males that were not of their immediate family. A male initiating a conversation with an unmarried woman was an unthinkable transgression. This minor act threatened the girl’s reputation, as well as the family honor. However, the social freedoms that Italian daughters enjoyed in America drastically affected their relationships with males.

Social freedoms enjoyed by working Southern Italian immigrant young women allowed them to engage and converse with males through unsupervised venues. One Italian male spoke of this transformation in the early twentieth century: “Where I come from, the women are told by their families before they are married that when they are married that they should not speak to any other man unless they know him to be a friend or family… In America, it’s a shame. The girls here go to dance hall and meet all kinds of bums.” These circumstances, in conjunction with the sense of independence that Italian daughters developed, changed the way in which a Southern Italian immigrant’s daughter found a husband. Many young working women met men in parks, on walks, on shopping excursions, and at dances. These encounters were not chaperoned by family members or neighbors, and though they were brief in duration, the fact that they occurred marked a dramatic difference from the stringent, chaperoned, and even arranged conditions of courtship in Southern Italian towns and villages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The freedom that came with widespread employment out of the home enfranchised women with more of a choice when it came to deciding who they would marry. This was a fundamental change that followed the emotional independence facilitated by widespread employment out of the home for young Southern Italian immigrant daughters living in New York City from 1890 to 1920.

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57 Gabaccia, 102.
58 Stave and Sutherland, 248.
59 Mondello, 115.
Between the years of 1890 and 1920, Italian immigrant women harnessed the opportunities that provided for personal independence in the United States. Their humble origins in menial labor venues situated them on a track that led to economic, educational, and social liberties that they never could have gained through life in Southern Italy. Exposure to the modern technology and society in the United States, in conjunction with the ramifications such exposure created a new class of informed, active citizens.

Given their humble origins, Southern Italian immigrant daughters monumentally advanced their societal status in the thirty-year period between 1890 and 1920. The Southern Italian immigrant family unit was a microcosm, reflective of the society at the time. In Southern Italy, daughters could not even leave the home unsupervised; as working girls in New York City, they traveled to and from work, met with their friends, spent some of their money on themselves, and no longer existed solely as workers that existed to better the family. The independence that they gained did not constitute a revolution; however, these small steps towards equality in the family occurred in tandem with the improvement of equal conditions in the workplace and in society. These women, armed with working knowledge, the support of the friends and contacts that they acquired in the workplace, and a bit of income to their names contributed towards the advancement of all females in twentieth century America. Suffrage, involvement in World War I and II, equality in the workforce and in collegiate environments – how would these developments have progressed without the support of thousands of working Italian immigrant daughters? This question would be easier to answer if more primary resources existed about the lives of these women.

Men penned so much of the information written in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century United States. Men wrote a greater percentage of the information about Southern Italy during this timeframe. Historians and researchers need to find more information written by Southern Italian women who lived and worked during this time to
adequately represent the story of the Southern Italian immigrant daughter living in the United States. Personal contact with this information fades as time passes. Over the years, the remaining Italian immigrant daughters pass on, and they bury with them important information that concerns their lives and the work that they conducted inside and outside of the immigrant household. The role of Southern Italian immigrant daughters in American history was so significant; their voices should be heard before the information is lost forever.
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