New Views on Gender 2014

The Role of Italian Women vs.
The Role of Italian-American Women

By Daniela Panetta

In this paper I examine the role of the Italian woman and try and figure out where this division of the everyday roles first started and if not where it started, how it started. When speaking of the “roles,” in reference to women, I mean roles like cooking, cleaning, taking care of the family, etc. The origin of the role of the Italian woman, if found, could help with subsiding the controversy that is ongoing even today and if not subsiding the issue completely, it could help with the understanding of the origin of the roles. When I speak of the “controversy” I mean the disagreements that both men and women are having on what are the “roles” that each one “should” be conducting. However, the question is, is there really a controversy or is it just a cultural teaching that women are inferior to men? Are these roles religiously inspired teachings and/or are they a socially constructed view? Are they a result of the way of life based on the economic standing and/or is it strictly biological, where there are certain organs that separate the sexes for a reason(s) or do the organs just hold a certain evolutionary purpose like mentioned through sexual selection? With the current change in the role of the woman in Italy I look at the situation through the eyes of three of my female family members that are currently residing in Italy. They give a general look at the roles the women had back in the 1960’s and how it was growing up for each of them as women at different ages. Also, I look at the current changes in the role and the affects of those changes. Yet with the rise in social popularity of North America, this led a lot of Italians to move where there are more opportunities and because of this there is a significant number of Italians living in the United States today. With that said, I look at the changes in the roles that occurred among the Italian-American women living in the U.S. Being an Italian-American myself, I also wanted to bring forth the similarities and differences that are seen between the roles of the Italian women and the Italian-American women.

Origin

The Italian woman’s role, in most cases, is widely known as being this traditional set of rules that comes with the territory. When a female is born into the family there is already a conscious
role present that will guide her through each stage of her life. She will be taught what are the responsibilities of the woman are and how they should be done accordingly. Female gender roles that begin in early childhood consist of: helping the women of the household with chores, the upkeep of the household, taking care of and helping raise the other children, helping prepare food, and helping with making sure the men of the household have what is needed for them to go to work on a daily basis. The roles of the adult women become more complicated because everything that was taught to them is for the reason that they will need to know the steps to then successfully execute them on their own, and eventually, teach her female children.

Religion

In order to authenticate the roles that I have listed, I conducted a small ethnography, through the use of Skype, where I asked three of my female family members what their everyday roles as females were and the ages they were when they conducted these roles. Their answers were all quite similar when it came to these questions. The first response was given by one of my aunts, where she responded with, “The role of the women was seeing what needs to be done, watching the children, and not to moving from the house.” My grandmother gave the next response, where along with the list of roles that my aunt had just said, she added, “Washing clothes and cooking.” My other aunt gave the next response, however, she just agreed with what had already been said by her older sister and her mother. When it came to the question of age all three of them first ignored the question, but when asked again they said, “You started helping as soon as you were old enough and then from then on that’s just what you did.” My next question that I asked them was, with all of these roles that were mentioned, where do you believe these roles came from? Their responses were very interesting because of the fact they had a hard time fathoming how to respond to the question. My uncle, who was sitting in the back, chimed in to respond to this question with, “Who really knows?” My aunt responded, “This was a result of the society that kept moving forward like this.” My grandmother replied, “This is just how it was here.” At this point I rephrased the question to see if I could get a deeper response as to where this role, in the minds of natives, actually came from. I asked, where would you say these roles came from, was there a specific aspect of the structure of the culture that influenced these roles? Their responses went straight for the Bible as an influence to these roles.
In other words, in my informants perspective the Bible is the origin of these roles and this is what society is continuing to carry out.

Economic

With the results of the ethnography it brings me to Linda L. Carroll's article, "Who's on Top? Gender as Societal Power Configuration in Italian Renaissance Drama," where she looks at the roles of men and women and how she believes that they came in periods, depending on what was going on economically in the area at the time (Carroll 1989:531). Carroll looks at these changes among the roles through pieces of art where she found within the late fifteenth to sixteenth centuries the images of men and women and the relations between them have dramatically changed (Carroll 1989:531). Carroll describes that through the artwork it was seen that at one point the dominant males were seen as "damaged and unable to maintain control of society," and because of that the females and the low-status figures—plus their ways of living—were brought to the top and put in control (Carroll 1989:531). However, due to war and invasions that occurred in the country, the population of men was at a scarcity and as a result to this dramatic social change, the artwork was now showing the change that was occurring within the gender roles where an increasing number of women "...where being tortured or maimed..." (Carroll 1989:531). After the war, and the Peace of Bologna, the country was reviving itself and with that, the image of the male became a positive one once more, but the female image became "restrained" (Carroll 1989:531).

Carroll mentions that she drew upon different works that were done by ethnologists, phenomenologist and neurologists to help explain her point that when the economic states were changing the people were reacting to it and changing as well (Carroll 1989:532). Carroll goes through and explains how during these times, when the gender roles would fluctuate, how the behavior among the genders was a factor to how the differences in roles could occur (Carroll 1989:532). For example, when one feels inferior and is under attack, one starts to display a certain posture that shows their inferiority (Carroll 1989:532). The inferior would start to do certain things to calm the aggressor and this might work and "if rewarded by success, submissive behavior tends to continue until conditions change" (Carroll 1989:532). Carroll's article brings forth a different way of looking at the origin of the controversy on
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gender roles. She explains that due to certain economic conditions in the past, the gender roles changed accordingly, therefore demonstrating one view of the origin of gender roles.

**Biological**

There is no doubt that men and women have a different biological structure but are these differences in structure the basis or origin of the gender roles? This is where Maureen J. Giovannini's article, "A Dominant Symbol Within the Cultural System of a Sicilian Town," comes into context. Giovannini’s article looks into the role of the woman and how within Italian communities the woman is looked at as the symbol of the family and because of that, the women's role in this article is to "perform domestic functions and exhibit chaste and modest behavior at all times" (Giovannini 1981:409). Giovannini goes on to explain that the women are also seen as the dominant symbol in the culture that is "supported by the myriad values, beliefs, and ritualized and non-ritualized behavior surrounding women in that community" (Giovannini 1981:409). She states that there are three physiological traits, which are "the ability to create and protect life, the ability to nurture and sustain life, and the ability to be physically penetrated," that define women in this culture that need to be protected because of the above reasons (Giovannini 1981:411). Since women, according to Giovannini, are believed to be "emotionally as well as physiologically weaker than men," maybe this is the reason to why certain gender roles exist within this culture (Giovannini 1981:411). Knowing that such traits are deemed as being good qualities in a woman, the man that marries her feels as if he needs to protect her from the "outsiders" that might try and take this ideal woman for themselves as seen through Darwin's sexual selection (Giovannini 1981:415). In this culture, since the women have such qualities that in a sense makes them the "weaker" gender, the male is then to protect her very well because if not, the woman will move on to the male that will better protect her.

Biological factors play a huge part in what sets us apart from each other and as said in the book, *Male and Female Roles: The Opposing Viewpoint*, written by Bruno Leone and M. Teresa O’Neill, there is not a "doubt that males and females are born with a different set of 'instructions' built into their genetic code" (Leone and O’Neill 1983:17). The role of the women could very much be strictly based on biology because of specific organs that separate the genders each have a common purpose or role. They also share a study that was conducted at Harvard University on the differences
between male and female baby behavior where the results were diverse (Leone and O'Neill 1983:17). They found that at four months female infants were more oriented toward people and this is because females tend to recognize voices and faces before male infants do (Leone and O'Neill 1983:17). The male infants were interested more in “things” and at four months they react more towards inanimate objects than anything else (Leone and O'Neill 1983:17). The list of differences could go on and on, but there is no doubt that men and women are different and that each gender has a specific code that makes us who we are. We are just not conscious of them and/or act upon them until we are taught and are influenced by our cultures.

The Change in the Italian Women

With some of the potential known origins of the Italian women, I introduce an article written by Carole M. Counihan, called, Female Identity, Food, and Power in Contemporary Florence, where she looks at the changes in the identity and power among the urban women that occurred since World War II (Counihan 1988:51). Counihan goes on to state one factor of the change in the roles, which was the change in the economic state at the time, also mentioned in Carroll’s article (Counihan 1988:51). She states that, “women today are living in a different world and are subject to different expectations from society and from themselves,” which could at one point clash because of the different importance of roles in traditional and contemporary times (Counihan 1988:56). When the role of the woman began to change due to the economic state, many women began to feel overwhelmed because now not only did they have to work in order to survive, but also they had to uphold their responsibilities of the household and as mother figure as well (Counihan 1988:51). Counihan views the role of women as being someone that already has power (1988:51). The power that women possess is that of food. The woman is a prime example in many cultures as being the one with the “primary responsibility for preparing food and giving it to others” (Counihan 1988:52). This is a role of women that is not normally seen as having power, but when one thinks about the importance of this role and how with this role can impact others or in a sense “manipulate” them, one can see the power behind it (Counihan 1988:52). Also, this role of “food” can be seen as the prime source of connections to others and an influence over others as well (Counihan 1988:52).
The three potential origins that were mentioned above are all a basis for the traditional role of the Italian women; however, the roles today have changed and are continuing to change. In this section of my paper I will describe the changes that are occurring and the effects of the changes within the Italian women’s role. In Manuela Naldini and Chiara Saraceno’s article, Social and Family Policies in Italy: Not Totally Frozen but Far from Structural Reforms, they talk about the changes in the political and public aspects of the culture that have to do directly with the families and women-friendly policies in Italy (Naldini and Saraceno 2008:734). They then go on to talk about the obstacles that have come up with the ongoing change in the "labour market and the rise in the labour force participation," but also for changes to be made so that women can have equal opportunities and for “reconciliation of work and families” (Naldini and Saraceno 2008:734). The biggest publicized resistance for the change is budget constraints, however the biggest set back is the fact that the government doesn’t want to change the “balance” internally (Naldini and Saraceno 2008:734). Here, it is seen that there is an inevitable change happening with the role of the Italian women, but since this change in the role is not of popular opinion, the government is trying to slow the progress way down (Naldini and Saraceno 2008:735). However, there might be a reason for that slowing of the process. The reason being that this change/transformation in women’s behavior, according to Naldini and Saraceno, is affecting many aspects of society like: the family, decrease in fertility rate, the cost of rearing children, and increase in frail elderly (Naldini and Saraceno 2008:735). The decrease in fertility rates in the Italian culture is becoming the central issue in the affects of the changes because the Italian government is concerned with the survival of Italian culture and ethnicity (Naldini and Saraceno 2008:735).

As seen in the Naldini and Saraceno article there is a lot of uncertainty that is present when it comes to the progress of making necessary transformations in the roles of Italian women. This uncertainty that the Italian women are currently dealing with is explained in the article, Precarious Changes: Gender and Generational politics in contemporary Italy, written by Laura Fantone. In the article, Fantone talks about the “precariousness” of the current situation in Italy and discusses how many different feminist groups are acting upon the government’s continuity to leave women in this state of precariousness (Fantone 2007:5). Also, she points out the necessary generational changes that need to happen in order for the young generation of females to have a brighter and more secure/stable future (Fantone 2007:5). The change that is necessary is not within the current situation
of uncertainty, but within the change in "people's perceptions, an adjustment to short-term time frames and the continuous updating of knowledge in order to address the complexity of everyday life" (Fantone 2007:6). If these perceptions of women in the working world do not change then I'm afraid that either the precariousness will continue or the role of the traditional women will step back into place, which I feel will be a negative affect on the advancement of the Italian state in the evolving world. However, one way feminists are trying to change this state of precariousness and move forward is by using the word as a basis to their argument. They link precarity directly to the fact that traditional Italian roles of women need to be disrupted and changed in order for women to survive in the evolving world around them (Fantone 2007:8). In addition, there are movements that feminist groups are trying to push to help accommodate women in the working world, since there is still this strong need for women in the culture to perform their traditional duties as a female within their personal lives (Fantone 2007:9). The whole of this paper is trying to explain why it is that these roles need to change and how they should be accommodated for women so that women can still provide the necessary attention to her family. Fantone feels that four specific changes need to be made in order for improvements, "economic independence, affordable access to childcare and education, freedom from family responsibilities and the related need for legal recognition of temporary living arrangements typical of precarious lives" (Fantone 2007:17). I do agree that change needs to happen among the already changing role of the Italian women because, as said by Fantone, this change in the role needs to be recognized that it is indeed happening and changes need to be made to help with the transition. However, I do not agree with the extreme need of freedom from family responsibilities. The family duty is a big part of the Italian culture and if this is completely taken away I do believe and agree with Naldini and Saraceno that this will eventually plummet the fertility rates and will then dramatically affect the Italian culture and ethnicity (Naldini and Saraceno 2008:735).

Changes in the Italian-American Women

In this section I will personally comment on the changes in the role of the Italian-American women and will make a comparison to the traditional Italian women's role. Growing up, the roles that were taught to me were not much different from how my aunt described above, expect for I was in a different environment and my family was in a better economic state. When I was a child I remember
my mother and grandmother were the ones that were guiding me through the steps of my traditional upbringing. I remember that they would show me something new everyday, whether it was cleaning, how to fold certain articles of clothing, and/or how to prepare/cook certain meals. They would always inform me on what was the proper way to act in all situations of life, especially in the presence of men. One aspect of my childhood that I have always kept in mind is the way my parents, more so my dad, always made sure that when we were out among other Italians that lived in the area, we as his children were on our best behavior because what we did and did not do was a direct reflection of him and my mom. As I got older and started to go to school many things started to change and started to stray from the traditional role of the women. While the traditional Italian woman was not allowed to move from the house unless there was a man with her, I had to leave the house by myself in order to go to school and interact with the other children. However, that was the only aspect of my childhood that was different from that of my aunts because every other aspect remained the same until young adulthood where I was involved in a lot more activities and needed the freedom to do said things. Even though I was brought up as if I was in a traditional Italian role, being in an environment that was evolving a lot quicker than in Italy's, this transition for me happened a lot quicker, which sometimes made it difficult to know where I stood between the two clashing cultures.

With my experience being noted I now bring in another article written by Jennifer Scuro called, Exploring Personal History: A Case study of an Italian Immigrant Woman, where she talks about her grandmother and her experience as an Italian-American Immigrant (Scuro 2004:43). Scuro begins with a little bit of background of her grandmother and how it was for her growing up in Italy and then transitioning to the States (Scuro 2004:44). Her grandmother, Gelsemina, talked about her life in Italy and how at one point her father left Italy to come to the states for more opportunities to work and make enough money to send to his family back in Italy (Scuro 2004:47). However, due to the economic state at the time, Gelsemina and the others in her family had to work in order for their family to survive (Scuro 2004:47). Gelsemina went on to describe her mother's independence of working, which she was allowed to have, and how she was doing very well for her family (Scuro 2004:48). Normally in the Italian culture such independence like Gelsemina's mother would not have even been a thought in one's mind because it was not considered their role; however, since her husband was in the states because they needed more money, she was socially accepted for her actions instead of
being shunned—which would have been the case without such circumstances (Scuro 2004:48). When Gelsemina came to America certain aspects, like family obligation remaining the priority, did not change (Scuro 2004:52). Also, having to work to help her family survive did not change either, even though it was illegal (Scuro 2004:52). As Gelsemina got older she actually earned the position as primary source of income for her family going against all traditional roles as an Italian woman (Scuro 2004:54).

Conclusion

The role of the traditional Italian women can be seen as being influenced by many different aspects of the Italian culture, economic, religious, and/or biological. The economic state of the culture can make dramatic changes in behavior, which can then lead to changes in the gender roles as seen and explained through the work of Carroll's article. The way one behaves when facing what they feel as someone superior to them or an attacker, they tend to make the superior person see this inferiority and the aggressor reacts upon it. If this behavior succeeds in calming the aggressor the behavior is rewarded and these roles tend to stick around until another dramatic change occurs. As seen through the ethnography that I conducted, religion is a big influence on what is considered the role of Italian women. The religious beliefs that are considered virtuous in a woman is seen in Giovannini's article when she explains that the role of the woman is for her to be modest and chaste at all times, as a woman of religion would be. I use Giovannini in the biological reference as well because she looks at women as having three main biological aspects and how these biological aspects make females the weaker sex and because of that the female must be protected by the stronger sex from predators/outsiders.

I then take the possible origins of the role and move on to exemplify the changes that have occurred and that are going to occur within the role of the traditional Italian woman and the Italian-American women in the near future. The role of the Italian women is slowly progressing to a modern state, but there are many aspects that are slowing it down such as the government’s ignorance to notice the change that is occurring and the conservatives that still feel that the traditional way is the best way. The Italian-American roles started out the same, but when one enters a new environment the present culture starts to take over and almost becomes the dominant culture. The roles in this
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sense changed dramatically and, more often then not, created a clash between the two sets of roles. Yet, in some cases, as seen in the Scuro article, the roles at one point are not applicable due to economic states, for example. Even though the role of a traditional Italian female would not even allow such actions to occur in some situations it comes down to just a matter of survival.

Bibliography


