

CHAPTER 4

Immigrant Women and Work

It is impossible to talk about immigrant women today and one hundred years ago without considering the enormous changes that have taken place in the lives of American women.

Women now vote—a right they gained only in 1920—and hold political office. More go to college, and beyond: by 1979, women students outnumbered men in the nation's colleges; some ten years later they earned over half of the bachelor's and master's degrees awarded and a third of the doctoral degrees.¹ Women executives and high-level professionals are no longer the rarity they once were. In 1910, only 1 percent of lawyers and 6 percent of physicians in the nation were women. By 1995, the figures had risen to 25 percent for lawyers and 22 percent for physicians.² Divorce is easier and more acceptable, and women on their own have access to social welfare benefits to a degree unknown earlier in the century.

Perhaps most dramatic, there has been a virtual revolution in women's involvement in the labor force. More women in the United States are now working for wages for more of their lives. Whereas in 1900 only 20 percent of women in the nation were in the paid labor force, by 1995 the figure had reached nearly 60 percent.

There is also a difference in who works. At the turn of the twentieth century, the vast majority of women workers were young and single. It was generally assumed that work outside the home was temporary for a young girl; when she married, she would move back into the domestic domain. Indeed, there was a social stigma attached to the working wife, who was often considered beyond the pale of middle-class respectability.³

Today, working daughters have given way to working mothers.⁴ Women now enter the labor force later—and they stay. Whether they work for economic need, to maintain or raise their family's living standards, or for per-

sonal satisfaction, the fact is that by 1990 almost three quarters of married women with children under eighteen worked in the paid labor force, many doing so full-time and year-round.⁵

How these broad changes in women's participation in the American labor force have affected the experiences of immigrant women today as compared to the past is the focus of this chapter. Wage work, as we shall see, has empowered immigrant wives and mothers in late twentieth-century New York in ways that were not possible for Jewish and Italian married women of an earlier era. Comparing a time when few married immigrant women worked for wages to a period when most do brings into sharper focus the relationship between migrant women's work and their overall status—and helps us understand the conditions that lead women to experience gains as well as losses when they come to the United States.

An important issue in both periods is how women's status changed in the process of moving to New York. A common popular perception about the past is that migration was liberating for European women who left traditional cultures, with their old-fashioned and repressive customs, for a freer America. To some degree, this view captures the experiences of young unmarried Jewish and Italian women in the past, but it most certainly misrepresents the situation of adult migrant women at the time, who were more constrained in many ways after the move to New York.

In the contemporary period, in contrast, migrant women of all ages in New York have tended to experience improvements in their status as women, although it is too strong to say that migration has emancipated them. Lately, feminist scholars have emphasized that migration's impact on women should not be conceptualized in stark either/or terms. Migration often leads to losses—as well as gains—for women, and traditional patriarchal codes and practices may continue to have an impact.⁶ In the spirit of the new feminist scholarship, this analysis makes clear that even when migration improves women's access to economic resources, as it often does today, they are not fully liberated.

Gender inequalities are still very much with us, and women—immigrants as well as the native-born—continue to experience special burdens and disabilities as members of the “second sex.” The Chinese say that women hold up half the sky, but many immigrant women in New York appear to be holding up more than their half. Indeed, immigrant mothers' continued responsibilities for child-care and domestic tasks add new complications for them when they are more likely to work outside, as well as inside, the home.

Jewish and Italian Women in the Great Migration

From the beginning, in the move itself, Jewish and Italian women typically followed men—husbands, fiancés, and fathers—who led the way. Women were a minority, too. The Italian migration was, more than anything else, a movement of single men coming to make money and go home. In most years of the peak migration between 1880 and 1910, about 80 percent of Italian immigrants to the United States were male.⁷ The Jewish movement was mainly a family affair, but even then men predominated: between 1899 and 1910 women made up 43 percent of the migration stream to the United States.⁸

A common pattern among male Italians at the turn of the century was to make the trip between America and Italy several times, either on their own or in the company of male kin or fellow villagers. Some returned to Italy for good. Many, however, settled in New York permanently once they had saved enough money and then sent for family members. Most Jewish men came to stay, but they, too, usually made the journey first, later sending for working-age children and then arranging for wives and younger family members to follow. Occasionally, Jewish daughters came first, becoming “emissaries of family survival” in America. According to Susan Glenn, once a network of relatives was established in New York, many Jewish families were willing, and found it practicable, to send one or more children, including working-age daughters, in advance.⁹

Although women usually had husbands and fathers to greet them, the voyage to the New World was nonetheless daunting. In his autobiography, Leonard Covello recalls that his mother had never been more than a few miles outside her Italian village when, in 1896, she made the long trip with her young children, first to Naples and then on the choppy seas for twenty days to New York. In the two-day wait at Ellis Island, before Leonard’s father came to meet them, his mother “hardly closed her eyes for fear of losing us in the confusion.”¹⁰ About the same time, in 1891, eleven-year-old Rose Cohen and her unmarried aunt left Russia for New York. They were joining her father, who had migrated a few years earlier, gotten a foothold in New York, and sent prepaid steamship tickets to his family. Rose and her aunt’s trip involved being smuggled across the border (for lack of proper local passports), a week-long wait in Hamburg in a dismal building owned by the steamship company, and an ocean crossing, in steerage, marked by days of terrible seasickness. About a year after Rose arrived, the rest of the family, including her mother, joined Rose and her father in New York.¹¹

Immigrant Daughters

No sooner had Rose Cohen settled in New York than she, like so many other Jewish girls, went to work in a garment sweatshop, recalling that her “fingers often stiffened with pain” as she “rolled and basted the [coat] edges.”¹² Jewish daughters, as Susan Glenn notes, were expected to go out and earn a living as a matter of course. It was as inevitable, said one worker, “as eating and breathing and finally dying. It was just part of the scheme of things.”¹³ Stereotypes about the freedom that America offered European migrant women are based on the experiences of immigrant daughters, although even in their case, there is a risk of exaggerating the extent to which they were empowered by the move to New York in this period. Although work outside the home often expanded young Italian and Jewish daughters’ horizons, factory jobs were debilitating, poorly paid, and sometimes downright dangerous and did not lead to much economic independence.

In 1910, more than three-quarters of unmarried Jewish immigrant daughters over sixteen worked for wages, the vast majority in the needle trades; even younger girls, those only fourteen and fifteen years of age, often worked outside the home.¹⁴ Italian girls were more likely to stay home helping with household chores or to engage in industrial homework, but large numbers also went to work in factories. By one count, in 1905 in New York City 62 percent of single Italian-born women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one were wage earners, typically in the garment industry but also in paper-box, candy, jewelry, and tobacco factories. For Italian girls from rural backgrounds, factory work in New York often represented the first experience with wage labor.¹⁵ Although some Jewish daughters in eastern Europe had worked in small factories or, more commonly, done industrial homework, their economic role expanded in New York, where, in the context of increased industrial opportunities, many more went out to work.¹⁶ Among the American-born or -raised, there was even some movement out of the factory into the office during this period; by 1905 one out of four Russian daughters in New York City was in white-collar employment, as a school teacher, clerk, salesperson, or shopkeeper, whereas the proportion among Italian daughters, 9 percent, was still very small.¹⁷

Immigrant daughters’ earnings were crucial to the family budget. A 1911 Bureau of Labor study of wages, hours, and economic conditions of women and children in the men’s clothing industry showed that Jewish working daughters brought in nearly 40 percent of their family’s yearly earn-

ings, slightly more than Italian daughters in the same situation.¹⁸ Their wages, nonetheless, were extremely low. In 1910, when a New York State Factory Investigating Commission estimated that a single woman living alone needed to earn ten dollars weekly to maintain a minimal standard of living, Italian and Jewish daughters typically earned between six and nine dollars a week. In addition, they worked in industries that experienced slack periods; for several weeks or months a year they might earn nothing at all.¹⁹

Young women's expanded wage-earning role in New York did not translate into economic independence or control. Italian and Jewish daughters understood their wages to be part of the family fund. They customarily handed over all their earnings, many giving their unopened pay envelopes to their mothers in return for small allowances to cover weekly expenses. "I gave my pay envelope to my mother," said Amalia Morandi, an Italian garment worker. "I wouldn't dare open it up. I'd give it to my mother because I knew that she worked hard for us and I thought this was her compensation."²⁰ A 1916 report, based on a survey of seven hundred single (mostly Jewish) women in New York shirtwaist factories, noted that the majority gave their "untouched and unopened" pay envelopes to their parents. The same was true for young Italian women, though some evidence suggests that Jewish daughters were allowed to retain a greater proportion of their earnings for personal use than their southern Italian sisters.²¹

Boys were less pressured to contribute all their earnings and typically received larger allowances than their sisters.²² Theresa Albino gave all her earnings to her mother, while her eighteen-year-old brother contributed three or four dollars a week. "But you know how it is with a boy," she explained; "he wants things for himself." Mothers also expected daughters to help them with housework or tend to younger siblings, an expectation not placed on sons, who had more freedom to roam the streets, play sports, and seek adventures with their friends.²³

There was a double standard educationally, too. Jewish daughters often went to work to support their brothers' pursuit of education. My own grandmother, who came from Russia as a child, remained bitter that she had to go to work as a secretary, without even finishing high school, while the family savings financed her brothers' education at private universities. Census reports for the beginning of the century show Russian Jewish boys more likely to go to high school and college than girls; moreover, in high school, boys predominated in the academically elite programs.²⁴ Although Italian families were less sure of the value of an American education in general, here too boys, as one immigrant recalled, "had always more privi-

leges than girls. . . . When girls at thirteen or fourteen wasted good time in school, it simply made us regret our coming to America."²⁵ An analysis of census data leads Miriam Cohen to conclude that if Italian families in New York invested in advanced schooling for their children at all, they were more likely to invest in the boys' than the girls'.²⁶ It wasn't hard in this period to get around the various regulations designed to keep children in school. Before 1903 in New York, only four years of schooling were required before a child could legally go to work, and working papers were relatively easy to obtain. Even when stricter compulsory education laws were enacted, requiring children to attend school until the age of fourteen, little effort was made to enforce the law, and children routinely obtained false working papers.

Conditions in the factories and sweatshops that employed Jewish and Italian daughters were grim. "Fourteen hours a day you sit on a chair, often without a back, felling coats"—this is how one union organizer described working conditions to Rose Cohen and other garment sweatshop workers at a union meeting in the 1890s. "Fourteen hours you sit close to the other feller hand [a worker who stitched the inside flaps of seams so that they would lie flat] feeling the heat of her body against yours, her breath on your face. Fourteen hours with your back bent, your eyes close to your work you sit stitching in a dull room often by gas light."²⁷

Even after 1910, when shorter, nine- to ten-hour workdays became the rule, many Italian and Jewish women factory workers extended their hours by overtime or taking work home. There was no alternative, they felt, to doing the additional work. They feared losing their jobs if they did not agree to the added work, and they were spurred on to sacrifice by economic pressures at home and the need for extra earnings. Seventeen-year-old Louisa Trentino was able to increase her weekly earnings of six dollars by fifty cents if she worked until 8:30 three nights a week. Her wages were the mainstay of the family: her father was employed irregularly as a hod carrier, and her mother and the young children earned a few dollars making flowers at home every week.²⁸

In addition to the long hours and low wages, the various fines and charges for supplies cut into earnings. An Italian corset operator who made about \$5.50 a week at piecework had to pay thirty cents a spool for thread and might use one or two spools a week.²⁹ In garment shops, girls had to rent their chairs and pay twenty-five cents to store their hats in a locker. Being five minutes late often cost an hour's pay, and fines were levied for mistakes on garments. A young Italian girl who trimmed the threads off of neckwear at four dollars a week had to pay for the collar if she made a cut

that could not be mended.³⁰ In other cases, there were charges for breaking a machine: one girl who earned about seven dollars a week at making padding for coats by machine had to pay \$1.50 when she broke part of it.³¹

In the factories, working conditions were notoriously unsafe: doors were often locked when work began; fire escapes were inaccessible; stairways were dark and dangerous; and machines and workers were crowded together. The disastrous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911, which resulted in the death of 146 workers, exposed the terrible overcrowding and dangerous conditions that plagued even the most modern garment factories.

There were some bright spots, however. Work outside the home brought opportunities to make new friends and to speak freely with peers without the presence of elders. Within female factory work groups, immigrant daughters broadened their cultural and social worlds. Susan Glenn writes of young Jewish workers cultivating new tastes in dress and adornment in garment factories and learning about American mores and modern conceptions of romance. Likewise, Italian daughters discussed current boyfriends and the latest romantic novels and magazines with friends on the job.³²

In fact, the move to New York gave immigrant daughters greater freedom over marriage choice. Old World patterns of arranged marriages began to give way in the context of new ideas and norms in America. In eastern European Jewish communities, matchmakers, or *shadkhens*, typically arranged marriages between a bride and groom, who were wed sight unseen. In New York, some dispensed with the services of matchmakers altogether as young people chose their own mates, often meeting—free of chaperones—at the array of public venues available in America, such as dance halls, amusement parks, lecture halls, and evening schools.³³ When matchmakers were used, they assumed a different role, introducing prospective mates who might reject the match.³⁴ Italian girls, too, had greater freedom to decide on prospective husbands than in Italy. As among Jews, parental influence remained strong. But no matter how much parents tried to restrict their daughters' social life, many young Italian women met and socialized with single men in the streets and parks, in walks around the block, and on trips to the beach and the movies.³⁵

As one historian suggests, young Jewish women's ability to earn their own living allowed them more control over whom they married and the power to resist the services of marriage brokers.³⁶ As time went on, Jewish daughters also gained more control over their earnings. They still felt obliged to contribute most of their wages to the family fund, yet it became

accepted to keep back at least a portion for their own use. By the 1920s, many Jewish parents had begun to believe that their daughters were entitled to some of the money they had earned for clothing and entertainment. Rather than have their daughters hand over all their wages and receive back an allowance, parents now accepted that daughters could decide how much money they required for expenses and then give their mothers the rest. "I just told my mother, 'This is what I need,'" recalled one woman. "And when I had to buy clothing, I went out and bought it." Young Italian women, generally living in poorer families than their Russian Jewish counterparts, were forced to accept for much longer—by one account, into the 1930s and 1940s—the expectation that they turn over their entire paychecks.³⁷

Immigrant Mothers

When newly arrived Rose Cohen asked her father whether everybody in America goes to work early, comes home late, and goes to sleep, day after endless day, he replied, "No, you will get married."³⁸ His comment reflects the realities for most American women at the time. Married white women were a rarity in the American workplace, with fewer than 5 percent of them working for pay in 1890 and 1900.³⁹ For the vast majority of Jewish and Italian immigrant women, marriage, typically at around the age of twenty to twenty-two, spelled the end of factory work.⁴⁰ In the 1930s and 1940s, some eventually returned to the paid workforce when their children were grown. But immigrant women who came to New York as married adults often never worked outside the home.

In one view, immigrant women's "retirement" to the domestic arena was a blessing.⁴¹ By taking in boarders and doing piecework at home, they contributed much-needed money to the family income while also rearing children and performing time-consuming domestic duties. Cleaning, cooking, and doing the laundry were labor-intensive chores for poor immigrant women who could not afford mechanical conveniences or hired help. The weekly laundry, for example, involved the laborious process of soaking, scrubbing, wringing, rinsing, drying, and ironing clothes. Although women did a tremendous amount of daily housework, they defined their own rhythms. Unlike the factory, where bosses were in control, women exercised real authority and set the pace in their own households. In *Call It Sleep*, Henry Roth's autobiographical novel of his Lower East Side childhood, Aunt Bertha looks forward to marriage: "Ten hours a day in a smothering shop. Ten hours, afraid to pee too often because the foreman might

think I was shirking. . . . I don't want to wear my buttocks to the bone sitting in a shop and weave paper flowers and rag flowers all my life."⁴²

In the home, immigrant wives nurtured and disciplined children. They also managed the family budget: husbands and sons usually gave them the larger part of their wages each week, and, as we have seen, most daughters handed over their entire paycheck. The role of housewife and mother, moreover, if done well, carried with it respectability and the approval of family and neighbors.

Yet it is important not to glorify immigrant wives' housebound existence. It had a downside as well. Although it may be too strong to say, along with one historian, that immigration disempowered women who came as wives and mothers and intensified their subordination, clearly there were aspects of life in the New World that represented a change for the worse.⁴³ For many Jewish and Italian women, the journey to New York imposed new constraints, and they were forced to lead more sheltered lives than they had in the Old World.

Jewish women came from a culture that offered them contradictory messages. On the one hand, patriarchy ran deep. Women were excluded from seats of power in the community and from positions in the religious sphere. The most respected people in the social order, religious scholars, were almost without exception men. Boys were encouraged to study rabbinic learning and the texts of the Hebrew Bible, and no sacrifice was too great to send a boy to *yeshiva*, or advanced religious school. "In Russia," said Ida Richter, an immigrant from a small town near Minsk, "a woman was nothing. . . . When my father used to pray in the morning with his prayer shawl, I used to hear him say in Hebrew, 'Thank God, I'm not a woman.' A girl wasn't much."⁴⁴

At the same time, women had a central role in economic life. The ideal Jewish man was a full-time scholar who withdrew from the mundane world while his wife labored to support him. Most men did not have the talent, education, or resources to live up to this ideal, but religious scholars, as the cultural elite, set the tone for the society as a whole. It was no shame for men to lack interest in business and no embarrassment for women to earn a living for her family.⁴⁵ "The hard-working scholar's wife acted as a legitimating symbol of the female breadwinner for the masses of east European Jews," Susan Glenn observes. "If the scholar's wife worked, then why not the merchant's, the trader's, the watchmaker's, or the tailor's? And that was the pattern." Women's work, throughout the world of eastern European Jews, was considered necessary and respectable. Says Glenn: "The

frequency of married women's work was high enough and had sufficient cultural support to make it something of a norm."⁴⁶

Large numbers of Jewish wives worked in business or trade, sometimes helping in a store formally run by their husbands or keeping a store or stall on their own where they sold food, staples, or household wares. Some women were peddlers who stood in the marketplace or went from house to house selling rolls and bagels and other food they had prepared at home.⁴⁷ Others bought small lots of manufactured goods in cities to trade with peasants in the market. Jewish wives, in these circumstances, became tough bargainers. They developed a knowledge of the marketplace and a certain worldliness about the society outside their own communities. In the market, women had a better command of local languages spoken by the peasants—Russian, Hungarian, and Polish—than did the more learned men, and many developed a reputation for being outspoken and aggressive.⁴⁸

The Jewish community itself provided some jobs for women, for example, as attendants at the *mikvah* (ritual bath) or as bakers of matzos at Passover. By the end of the nineteenth century, with the development of factory production in Russia and the movement of many Jews to cities, increasing numbers of young unmarried Jewish women were drawn to artisans' shops and small factories, where they made matches, cigarettes, and other goods. The sewing machine created new opportunities for doing outwork, and thousands of married and single homeworkers made dresses or did other kinds of needlework for contractors, who then distributed the garments to stores. As a last resort, some unmarried girls went into domestic service. When they married, Jewish women rarely took factory jobs or paid work that demanded long hours away from home. Instead, many were involved in various kinds of home-based artisanal or outwork production.

The move to New York altered notions of a married woman's proper role. In Russia, one immigrant woman explained, often "the women made a living for the man." In New York, she added, it was widely acknowledged that "a man of character never let his wife work."⁴⁹ The husband was expected to be the main support of his family. A character in Abraham Cahan's novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* tells Levinsky that before he came to America his wife "had a nice little business. She sold feed for horses and rejoiced in the thought that she was married to a man of learning." In this country, however, "instead of supporting him while he read Talmud, as she used to do at home, she persisted in sending him out to peddle. 'America is not Russia,' she said. 'A man must make a living here.'"⁵⁰

Formerly respected for their abilities as breadwinners, married women increasingly stressed their domestic over their economic role. The practical problems of child-care and domestic responsibilities in New York made it hard to work outside the home. Because grandparents seldom migrated, they were not around to help out; older daughters were in school or at work themselves. Household tasks were more demanding in the context of new standards of cleanliness and new acquisitions. Moreover, in the American cultural environment, female labor was seen as a necessary evil to be tolerated only if a family was in difficult economic circumstances or, for single women, as a brief interval between adolescence and marriage. Wives' income-producing activities took place, by and large, in the home and often remained hidden and unacknowledged as "work."⁵¹

Hardly any Jewish wives worked for wages. In 1880, census materials show only 2 percent of immigrant Russian Jewish households in New York City reporting wives who worked for wages; in 1905, the figure fell to 1 percent.⁵² A United States Immigration Commission survey of households in seven cities (including New York) a few years later revealed an average of only 8 percent of Russian Jewish wives in paid employment.⁵³

In the early years of the immigration, in the 1880s and 1890s, many Jewish women did piecework at home in the needle trades. After this, the increasing shift of garment production to factories, legislation on tenement manufacture, and competition with lower-paid Italian women who came into the clothing industry sharply cut the participation of Jewish women in the homework market.⁵⁴ Taking care of boarders, virtually indistinguishable from other domestic duties, became a more attractive alternative—and the main way Jewish wives contributed to the family income.

According to the Immigration Commission's 1911 study, as many as 56 percent of New York Russian Jewish families had boarders living with them.⁵⁵ Rose L. observed that Jewish women did not work outside the home once they were married. "Boarders you had," she recalled; "you worked for them, you cooked for them, you cleaned for them."⁵⁶ In Judith Weissman's Lower East Side tenement apartment, two men who worked in the same factory as her father boarded with her family. The two boarders shared a bedroom, while she slept on the couch with her brother—until her father thought she was too old for this. Her brother then moved into the kitchen, where his bed consisted of two chairs placed close together. Even when the family moved to a better apartment, they had three boarders who, in addition to rent, paid thirty-five cents a month for a big dinner every day.⁵⁷

Many immigrant wives helped their husbands in mom-and-pop stores,

and some ran the shops on their own. "Minding" the store was considered an extension of a woman's proper role as her husband's helpmate. Often the family lived above or in the back of the store so that wives could run back and forth between the shop counter and the kitchen. "If you had to help out in the store," one immigrant woman said, "you were still at home." Even if the store or stall was physically apart from the family apartment or if wares were peddled on the street, such enterprises had more legitimacy for a Jewish married woman than wage work, because they gave her more independence and greater flexibility regarding child rearing and domestic tasks.⁵⁸

The result of Jewish mothers' work patterns in New York was their "heightened centrality" in the home, where the overwhelming majority did all their work, both paid and unpaid. In his memoirs of his Brownsville childhood, Alfred Kazin recalls how the kitchen, where his mother cooked and sewed, was her life. "All my memories of that kitchen are dominated by the nearness of my mother sitting all day long at her sewing machine. . . . Year by year, as I began to take in her fantastic capacity for labor and her anxious zeal, I realized it was ourselves she kept stitched together."⁵⁹

By and large, married women's lives were more circumscribed in New York. Jewish immigrant mothers did, of course, socialize with friends and neighbors and go out to shop. As the family member most responsible for decisions about household purchases, the Jewish housewife presided over the acquisition of consumption items. Jewish women are said to have excelled in the American custom of bargain hunting as they scoured the Lower East Side in search of goods at low prices.⁶⁰ But whereas in eastern Europe, Jewish wives were often the worldly ones, in America their housebound existence made it more difficult to learn the new language and customs.⁶¹ Their husbands picked up English in the workplace, and their daughters learned American ways in factory work groups. Many mothers, however, remained fluent only in Yiddish and felt uncomfortable in new situations outside the Jewish community.⁶² They had to depend on their children to teach them American customs or, as a few managed to do, attend night school to learn English.⁶³

Jewish wives from small towns and villages, used to doing chores like laundry in the company of other women, now faced the more lonely and difficult task of washing clothing by themselves inside cramped tenement apartments.⁶⁴ According to Elizabeth Ewen, housework was generally more demanding in America. In small European towns and villages, women went to the nearest stream or lake once a month to wash clothes; now the laundry was a weekly task. Another example: mattresses in eastern Europe were

generally made of straw, and in cold weather feather bedding was common. In America, beds came with mattresses that required sheets and blankets, all of which needed to be washed and aired on a regular basis.⁶⁵

Immigrant wives' income-earning activities rarely represented the major contribution to the family economy. Industrial homework or taking in boarders was not as lucrative as work outside the home, and wives were seen as helping out their husbands in family businesses. From being charged with providing a major portion of the family livelihood in eastern Europe, married women in America were now outearned by their working daughters in the industrial labor force, who emerged as the main female breadwinners in the Jewish family.⁶⁶

Italian immigrant wives also became more housebound in New York, and their wage-earning daughters also earned more than they did. Although they took an active role in the family economy in both Italy and New York, the nature of this participation inevitably changed in significant ways in the New World.

In the rural Sicilian and southern Italian villages immigrants left behind, married women supervised household chores, organized the making of clothes and food preparation, and managed the family budget. Often, they tended animals and tilled the garden, producing food for family consumption and for sale at the local market. Artisans' wives also helped out in the shop. Although it was a mark of poverty for women to work in the fields, wives in poorer families often had no choice but to help as day laborers during harvest periods, picking fruits and nuts, husking almonds, and threshing wheat.⁶⁷

Peasant women's day-to-day work took them out of the house and brought them into contact with people of varying status. Although artisans' wives worked inside the privacy of their homes, the small, dimly lit houses of peasant women made poor workplaces. Whenever the weather allowed, they did their household chores outside, alongside neighbors in the street or courtyard. The Sicilian *cortile*, or shared courtyard outside a group of houses, was, according to one writer, a kind of shared living room.⁶⁸ Sicilian peasant wives met as they hauled water from the fountain or distant springs and sat together at open streams laundering clothes. It was not unusual for them to help better-off families with heavier household chores in return for food or money or to sell eggs or other produce to more prosperous neighbors.⁶⁹

When they moved to New York, most Italian wives did not go out to work for wages, although the percentages were higher than for their Jewish counterparts. The 1905 census recorded only 6 percent of immigrant Ital-

ian households in New York City with wives employed outside the home, mainly in tailoring shops and textile factories.⁷⁰ These figures are probably too low. A 1913 study of Italian women in lower Manhattan found that in more than half (279) of the 515 families where the mother was living at home, she contributed to the family income. As many as a third of the income-earning mothers did factory work, largely in men's and women's clothing and in the flower and feather industries. More than a third did industrial homework; about a fifth kept lodgers and boarders.⁷¹ More Italian than Jewish married women worked in shops outside the home or in formal employment, because their husbands generally earned less.⁷² As Kathie Friedman-Kasaba puts it, Italian women's continued participation in "the lowest-paid and most exploitative segments of clothing production owed largely to the low-paid and highly irregular employment available to the Italian immigrant men of their households."⁷³

Once they had children, most Italian women earned money by working at home. Although many Italian wives supplemented their husbands' income by taking in boarders, it was a less frequent practice than among Jews.⁷⁴ Homework was common. By the first decade of the century, most industrial homeworkers in New York City were Italian. Wherever home garment finishers exist in large numbers, one investigator wrote, "we may be sure that they are Italians. . . . Among the Italians may be found whole blocks that are practically colonies of home finishers."⁷⁵ The typical Italian homeworker was in her mid-thirties, and most were between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five.⁷⁶ Working in the kitchen or a bedroom, Italian women finished garments or made artificial flowers while raising their children and caring for the house. Children in the family had to pitch in, too. Accounts of homework in the artificial-flower industry describe Italian children of three and four helping make violets by picking apart petals and dipping stems into paste.⁷⁷ Older children relieved their mother of the need to walk the few blocks to carry bundles of clothing and boxes of flowers back and forth from the contractor to their homes.

In one Italian family of ten, the father earned \$7.00 a week selling lunches in a saloon; the oldest daughter made \$6.50 in a box factory; and the sixteen-year-old son brought in \$3.00 as a wagon boy. Four children were at school, and two babies were at home. Every member of the family except the father and two babies helped make flowers. The mother worked irregularly during the day, the school children after school hours, and the working daughter and son in the evening. They made three-petaled violets at \$.07 cents a gross, earning a total weekly wage of \$3.00. They lived in three rooms for which they paid \$12.50 a month.⁷⁸ The pressure to increase

earnings, and the demands of housework, meant that homeworkers often worked late into the night. More than one-third of a group of Italian artificial flower makers reported that they had worked after 10 P.M. the week before, two-thirds of the late-night group having worked past 3:00 A.M. at least once during the week.⁷⁹

Homework paid distinctly less than factory jobs. One study of artificial flower makers in New York found that the average weekly wage for factory workers was \$6.72; for home workers it was \$4.92, and this represented combined earnings for an average group of more than three workers.⁸⁰ Women were well aware that factory jobs paid better, but the demands of caring for young children and household duties, as well as the widely accepted notion that women should leave the workplace after marriage, usually kept them at home. One Italian homeworker with four children under the age of four had worked in a candy factory before she married. "That's better than making flowers," she said, "but we can't go to work after we're married."⁸¹

Like Jewish immigrant wives, Italian women working at home were more insulated from American ways and language than other family members. One Italian minister of the time wrote of hearing Italian women say "I have been down to America today" to describe going a few blocks outside the Italian enclave.⁸² Whereas Andrea Bocci's father frequented a Prince Street saloon every night, her mother never went out: "If one of her friends would be sick, she would go and help them out, but otherwise she would stay at home."⁸³ Italian, like Jewish, wives visited with neighbors in the halls and stairways, on front stoops, and in their apartments, but they led a more "inside"—more isolated—life than in Italy.

Most household chores, as well as industrial homework, were done within the four walls of their tenement apartments. By 1911, according to the Immigration Commission's report, women in Little Italy did not have to leave their tenement buildings to get water, although a considerable number shared a sink with people in other apartments.⁸⁴ Whereas washing in Italy was a social function, in New York it was a task for the individual woman.⁸⁵ Laundry was done in the apartment in big tubs filled with water boiled on the kitchen stove. The kitchen was also the place for cooking meals and for doing industrial homework. Women went out to do some of their shopping, but they also often sent children to make purchases for meals as well as to pick up materials from contractors. The move from Sicily to Elizabeth Street, Donna Gabaccia concludes, "limited immigrant women's opportunities to interact with others," and these limitations were a source of dissatisfaction with their new environment.⁸⁶

Even as modern plumbing freed women from some of the more rigorous chores they had known in southern Italy, new standards of living and new household acquisitions complicated housework. "We had no blinds, no curtains and the floors were all made of stone," said one Sicilian woman. "You have no idea how simple life is over there. Here one must wash two or three times a week; over there once a month."⁸⁷ New York ovens could not produce a satisfactory Sicilian bread; those who did not buy bread in New York now had to mix the dough and take it to a nearby baker.⁸⁸ Certainly, life in America for Italian wives and mothers, like their Jewish counterparts, meant hard work from dawn to dusk, but it was mainly work in the home—and, by and large, unpaid. This is something that would change in radical ways for the immigrant women who came in the next great wave.

Contemporary Patterns

Today's immigrant women have advantages unknown a century ago. They arrive with different educational and occupational backgrounds than their Jewish and Italian predecessors. More important, the world they live in gives women opportunities and benefits unheard of then.

The very composition of today's immigrant streams gives women a numerical edge. Women immigrants now outnumber men in virtually all of the major groups coming to New York (see table 9). In large part, this is because U.S. immigration law favors the admission of spouses and children as a way to reunite families and has made it easier for certain kinds of workers, like nurses, to get immigrant visas.⁸⁹ In the early 1990s, there were ninety-two male immigrants for every hundred females entering New York City, down from ninety-eight males per hundred females in the 1980s. The balance in favor of women is especially striking among Filipino immigrants: in the 1980s, there were sixty-seven males per hundred females in this group; in the early 1990s it was sixty-three per hundred. The Filipino migration stream includes a relatively large proportion of spouses of American citizens. Also, many Filipino women have gained entry on the basis of their occupations in the health-care field.⁹⁰

It is not just that women, rather than men, predominate today. More women come on their own rather than follow in the footsteps of men. The structure of U.S. immigration law, changing gender roles, and economic opportunities for women are all responsible for this trend. Immigrant women's concentration in specific high-demand occupations—like private household work and nursing—has enabled many to play a more