

Two Generations in Conflict

Sex Role Expectations Among Italian-Canadian Women

By Lia Pichini

There is no doubt that the struggle for equality has been a long and hard one for women in Canada. Perhaps it has been even more so for immigrant women and their daughters. Take the Italian-Canadian community, for instance. Most first-generation Italian immigrant women in Canada still uphold the same traditional, conservative, double-standard values that dominated in the old country. After their immigration to Canada in the post World War II years, Italian immigrant women sought to impose those same outdated values on their children. The result has been a marked contrast between mother-daughter sex role perceptions.

While many Italian-Canadian mothers support traditional, woman-in-the-home roles, their Canadian born and/or educated daughters have come to expect more sex role equality. This has come about as a result of their Canadian schooling and their exposure to feminist ideals through literature and the media. Most of these second-generation Italian women want to break with traditional female stereotypes. They want the freedom to choose a career, marry and have children at their own convenience, rather than conform to the familial customs expected of them.

For Italian-Canadian women, adapting to life in Canada has been a Catch-22. First-generation Italian mothers cannot escape the constraints of their unliberated past. This has made it all the more difficult for them to accept the image of a free and independent woman, something which has become commonplace to their daughters. By the same token, the daughters are also caught in a conflict situation whereby

they want to achieve their own freedom and independence, but at the same time want their mothers' approval and support. Regrettably, however, seldom do they get it.

While it is true that many of the mothers want their daughters to have an education, rarely do they encourage their daughters to pursue higher education. For many, a career is only secondary: priority must be given to such traditional values as marriage and children. This is particularly evident in their show of pity for single young women whom they assume cannot find themselves a suitable mate, or for married women who cannot bear children.

In many ways, Italian immigrant women are victims of the immigration process, as well as of the predominance of multiculturalism in Canada. Because of the Italian community's enormity (after all, it is the fourth largest ethnic group in all of Canada, following the British, French and German groups), as well as its closely-knit nature, Italian-Canadians have managed to perpetuate old world values. In effect, cultural retention has allowed the community in general, and women in particular, to remain stagnant. The community is caught between two worlds: while it is not yet Canadian, because of the maintenance of its language and customs, neither is it any longer Italian by today's standards. Rather, it lies in limbo, somewhere between an Italy that once existed in the 1950s and 1960s, before Italians departed for Canada.

Many Italian women in Canada have been segregated from the rest of Canadian society primarily because of the language barrier that exists. For many of these

women, thirty years in Canada have done little to alter their ways of thinking. Their scant knowledge of English has kept them virtually ignorant of the North American woman's movement. It has been very difficult for them to adjust to, or even accept, the changes that have taken place in both Canada and Italy. They recall the Italy of their childhood as being one of limited choices. Few, if any, had the privilege of an education. One married young and had a few children. Then, life centered around the home, raising children, and doing household chores.

Today, they have passed this legacy on to their children of both sexes. This middle-aged group of women still expect their daughters to carry on such chores as cleaning the house, doing the laundry, ironing, and raising the children. The man's role is primarily that of breadwinner. In addition, he is expected to do handiwork or gardening. The trouble is that it does not seem to be a fair tradeoff, when most of these immigrant mothers have had to enter the workforce out of necessity. After a day of work outside the home, most likely in a factory, they expect themselves to do all the housework they felt they should have done had they been home. Cursed are the households without any female children, for the mothers would never dare ask their sons to lift a finger to help them. For them, this would not seem right.

The female children want to escape this rut. They are confused by the duality of their cultures. The situation in school presents a sharp contrast to their lifestyle at home. While they are taught that women have a large range of choices today, and that more and more opportuni-

ties are becoming open to them through their exposure to feminist ideals in school, their home experiences tell them differently. In many Italian-Canadian families, value is placed on traditional female occupations, also known as 'pink collar' jobs. Many are encouraged to pursue occupations that offer practical skills, like hairdressing or dressmaking, which can be continued in the home once the girl is married.

There are some who would argue that these mother-daughter conflicts are no different from those experienced by all mothers and daughters the world over — the implication being that the conflicts are merely generational. Although this is true to an extent, one cannot deny the fact that cultural differences also play a major role. Multiculturalism has allowed ethnic cultures in Canada to practice the traditions of the old country, and thus perpetuate the dominant ideologies of those distinct cultures. Furthermore, because few Italian immigrants speak English, the communication barrier with their predominantly English-speaking children is reinforced: this adds to the mother-daughter conflict.

Another contributing factor which has kept first-generation Italian mothers unaware of feminist ideals is the Catholic Church. Because Italian-Canadians practice their religion to a greater extent than do Italians of today, the predominance of church dogma, which opposes abortion, pre-marital sex, and women in the priesthood, has greatly influenced the beliefs of these women, who undoubtedly are more ardent church-goers than Italian-Canadian men.

Even their ties with Italy have done little to expose them to feminist ideals. The women's movement there has made many strides in recent years, but the changes that have taken place have occurred much too quickly for first-generation Italian-Canadian mothers to grasp the importance of, or even understand, the movement's aims. This has created many misconceptions about the movement in general. Among these are that women involved in the movement either want to be like men, superior to men, or altogether hate men. It is these very same biases that have prevented mothers and daughters from seeing eye-to-eye on issues concerning women's roles.

Thus the conflict continues. First-generation Italian immigrant women find it difficult to accept feminist ideals due to the constraints of their Italian upbringing in which double standard values were prevalent. These ideas are embedded in their mentalities and explain why they have not been able to assimilate the contrasting values that predominate in Canada — and which their Canadian-born and educated daughters espouse. Hopefully, the situation will be an improved one for Italian-Canadian generations to come as the dominant ideologies of the old country that conflict with Canadian ideologies begin to fade away with each new generation.

The difference in the views and perceptions of Italian-Canadian women regarding equality among the sexes is merely one example among many that reveals the clash of ideals that shape two different cultures. Perhaps this is a reflection of the Italian-Canadian entity, which remains very much a clash of two cultures, rather than the amalgamation that many would like to believe it to be.



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