

Worker women of the tobacco industry in the Lecce province
Housewives and also factory and agricultural workers in the years of the *economic boom*

Abstract

Tobacco manufacturing controlled by the State monopoly represented an economic sector of extraordinary importance in Italy for a number of reasons, the most outstanding one being its great capability to recruit female labour force. The production process was carried out through three stages: farming and leaves picking were followed by the preparation of raw products and finally by cigarettes and cigars manufacturing. These stages were performed, respectively, in country fields, private factories for the first stages of production and factories owned exclusively by the State.

Tobacco manufacturing was introduced in the southern area of the Puglia region in the early 1900s, and remained the most significant source of income for most farm labourers' families up to the 1960s. In this area of rural traditions tobacco cultivation concerned only the first two stages of production, as seasons of farming in the fields alternated with seasons of manufacturing in hundreds of factories which employed almost the entire female labour force of the province. The production process was run by wealthy property and landowners who were able to make huge profits, of which only a small percentage was destined to the workers. Women's work experiences, characterized by the sharing of factory spaces, rhythms and discipline, alternated with the different timing and methods of the agricultural work, and created relations and exchanges between women that affected the whole community, of which tobacco factories constituted an essential feature.

Precarious work contracts and the workers' low-grade qualification were typical aspects of the female labour force, but there was no trace of the classic trait that generally made women secondary to men as breadwinners. In the 1950s, in fact, as widespread agricultural unemployment was causing a significant drop in male earnings, female work in tobacco factories acquired great economic and social importance, which furtherly intensified when the State decided to dramatically reduce the production of tobacco in Lecce on grounds of poor quality standards.

The population reacted with strikes and protests that involved all the members of the community thus revealing a strict relation between women's work and collective interests.

As tobacco production was being dismantled in the area, peasant communities disappeared as a result of intensive national and international migration, and eventually husbands resumed their roles of main breadwinners.

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