

Part II: Italian Women. La Mamma, But not Only

Judith Harris (December 04, 2015)



Italy has always loomed as a bastion of "la mamma" -- that pasta-cooking, loving and forceful woman exemplified by the mother and retired teacher in Nanni Moretti's recent movie, "Mia Madre." But there is more to the story. Here is a sampler of fascinating, successful Italian career women, some famous names, others new to many readers.

The debate in the U.S. over women's roles in career vs (or with) raising a family continues here. It was triggered two years back by Sheryl Sandberg in her book "Lean In", which sold a million copies. In it Sandberg argued that family-minded women can also enjoy professional success.

Taking the opposite tack was Anne-Marie Slaughter, in her "Why Women Still Can't Have It all." Slaughter had been teaching at Princeton University and working for Hillary Clinton, when she quit to



spend more time with family.

Her article on the theme, published by The Atlantic magazine, was seen by one million readers. And in Italy? Italian Ministry of Labor statistics show that fewer than one out of two women are in the work force (46.1%), well below the European median of 58.2%. By contrast, almost two-thirds of the women in Sweden and Denmark (70%) hold jobs.

[Elena Ferrante](#) [2], who was born in Naples in 1943, is among Italy's most famous authors, right up therewith Umberto Eco. Google her name, and up pop the covers of some of her books translated into English, with titles like "The Story of the Lost Child" (2014), "Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay" (2013), "The Story of a New Name" (2012), and so on for six more novels, two of which have been made into movies. Elena Ferrante, however, is a pen name: she is secretive, gives no interviews, and it is an accepted convention that no one knows exactly who she is. Is she even a woman? According to a New Yorker magazine writer who corresponded with her, probably yes, for she refers to herself as a mother.

[Federica Mogherini](#) [3] is exactly the opposite, with an incredibly high profile and towering responsibilities as High Representative and Vice President of the European Union -- that is, the secretary of state for the EU. Born in 1973, she took office just 13 months ago, in the heels of [Emma Bonino](#) [4].

For the eight previous months this pretty young mother had been Italian Foreign Minister in the cabinet of [Premier Matteo Renzi](#) [5]. A graduate of La Sapienza University of Rome, she entered Parliament in 2008. She is married to Matteo Rebasani, who works for Save the Children. The couple have two daughters.

[Miuccia Prada](#) [6] was born in Milan in 1949 and, in her student days, was a member of the Italian Communist party. She is today perhaps Italy's best-known fashion designer -- a business woman and designer who kited the Prada firm, founded by her grandfather, Mario, into a 2.7 billion-dollar company. She went to work there in 1978, when she was 29, and there she met her future husband Patrizio Bertelli. Fashion experts praise her for "blazing her own trail" in the company with innovation, taste and courage. The woman named by Forbes magazine as "fashion royalty" has two children.

[Silvia Candiani](#) [7] is one of the many noted Italian women managers. Director of Marketing and Operations for Microsoft Italia, she is also General Manager for the Consumer Channel Group for Central and East Europe. Family matters as well as her progress in the technological innovation sector; we are told that she has two children, enjoys family life and skiing and sail boating.

[Emma Marcegaglia](#) [8], born in Mantua in 1965 and a graduate of the Bocconi University in Milan, surged to worldwide fame in 2008 when she became the first woman to head Confindustria, the Italian national association of manufacturers. Since leaving Confindustria in November 2014, she has served as chairman of the board of the state-owned oil company Eni. A wife and mother, she has been awarded the French Legion of Honor by President Sarkozy.

The late [Marisa Bellisario](#) [9], born in 1935, died of cancer in 1988, but still holds a special role as Italy's first and most famous high-flying woman manager. After receiving her degree in economics from the University of Turin, she went to work for Olivetti, then transferred in 1965 to the U.S., becoming head of the Olivetti Corp. of America. Asked the secret of her success, she responded, "Work, work, work." Elsewhere she said that, "For a woman to be successful is more difficult [than for a man], but much more amusing." A foundation was created in her name as well as a prize, awarded annually to the women most distinguished for managerial skills.

To consult the Italian Labor Ministry charts, see [>>>](#) [10]



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