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Growing Beyond the Fields



Claudio Palmisano for the International Herald Tribune

The three generations of farmers on La Mia Terra farm, from left: Tiziana Lauretti, Fia Maria, her grandmother, and Iolanda Di Girolamo, her mother. As small farms struggle in Italy, some women are stepping in with creative survival tactics like agricultural tourism, farmers' markets, organic farming.

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO Published: January 3, 2012

PONTINIA, ITALY — On her tiny farm in a former marshland reclaimed under Mussolini, Tiziana Lauretti grows plums and favetta di Terracina, the bright red, sweet strawberry celebrated in this patch of central Italy.

THE FEMALE FACTOR

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But oscillating demand for her crops and volatile food prices have pushed Ms. Lauretti to adopt the survival tactics typical of many small farms in Europe.

These days, visitors to this family owned homestead can gawk at a motley crew of farm animals, as well as two tetchy peacocks, the most recent addition to the menagerie, or buy homemade prune or strawberry jam. During the school year, she said, classrooms of children "who have never seen an egg outside of a supermarket" get their hands covered with flour while baking pizza in a small wood-burning oven

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Ms. Lauretti's farm offers visitors sweet strawberries, in fresh and jam forms, as well as farm stays, complete with a pool.

on the farm, which covers just three hectares, or about seven acres.

If Ms. Lauretti's experience is typical of small farmers scrambling to make a living in an increasingly globalized economy, it is also typical in another way: Women, who manage one-third of Italian farms, have been particularly open to branching out the core business, what operators call multifunctional agriculture.

"I couldn't make a living only by selling strawberries and plums," Ms. Lauretti said. "Either you have a large farm, or you diversify, like we did."

Andrea Segrè, dean of the faculty of agriculture at the University of Bologna, said women were finding "lots of space" in multifunctional areas like agricultural tourism, farmers' markets, organic farming and direct sales.

And agriculture schools across Italy have seen an increase in enrollment, particularly among women, he said. "The agriculture of the future is very much female, as it has always been," he said. Preliminary 2010 census data, issued in July, showed that the number of Italian farms had decreased by 32.2 percent in the previous decade, but fewer women than men had decided to throw in the towel.

The Italian experience is by no means unique, but the female farm work force is significantly higher here than elsewhere in Western Europe. In the most recent Eurostat figures available, from 2007, Italy had a female farm labor force of 1.3 million, well ahead of comparably sized European Union nations like France and Germany, neither of which reached even 340,000.

Even another traditionally agricultural country like Spain only had 660,000 female workers, half those of Italy. And for all these countries, the profile was similar for women who manage farms.

Mara Longhin, president of Donne in Campo, or Women in the Field, part of the Italian Farmers' Confederation, said women "are way ahead of the curve" in diversifying, noting that most small farms cannot sustain themselves through crops or livestock.

The involvement of women in multifunctional agriculture has helped society in important ways "like food security, rural development and the safeguarding of the natural landscape," she said. Increasingly in Italy, too, farms have begun to offer day-care services in rural areas "where there isn't a lot of support for working mothers," said Ms. Longhin, who runs a dairy farm in Campagna Lupia, near Venice.

Silvia Bosco, who follows women's issues for Coldiretti, another farmers' confederation, said government support for women in business was "practically nonexistent."

"There's a lot of talk about equal opportunity," she said. "but in practice it is limited."

Women are vastly underrepresented at a political and institutional level, added Susanna Cenni, a member of the Democratic Party who sits on the agricultural committee of the lower house of Parliament.

"There is an enormous distance between the reality of women working in agriculture and their representation" in government or boardrooms or research and economic institutes, "even if they are competent," she said. "Unfortunately, politics count, and in politics, men are the first pick."

Agriculture Minister Mario Catania said in an interview that the economic crisis had

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sharply diminished public spending, meaning that “there are no resources to put on the table” for female farmers. In any case, Mr. Catania said, earmarking money according to sex is “not simple to enact.” Italy would do better, he said, to improve family services like day care to help more women join the work force.

Not all the farms run by women are mom-and-pop operations, of course. In various sectors, like cheese-making and especially wine, “there are many names that count,” said Veronica Navarra, president of the Italian Observatory for Female Enterprise and Labor in Agriculture, a government-run organization.

“The world of agriculture in Italy used to be very male-oriented, but now there’s been a reversal,” she said, thanks in part to a few institutional and grass-root networks that offer both financial and moral support to women.

Gaetana Jacono is the sixth-generation descendant — but first woman — to manage Valle dell’Acate, a 100-hectare Sicilian wine estate that produces about 400,000 bottles a year. The business now exports 70 percent of its production, thanks to Ms. Jacono’s foresight. She said that in Sicily, the top-selling women wine makers, of which there are several, “are tight” and often travel together.

“We have great respect for each other’s work, I think more than men do,” she said.

“Women can work together, we have this in Sicily and it only gets stronger as time goes on,” she said, adding that discrimination, “which certainly exists,” had been a strong bonding agent.

Such hurdles include trying to get credit. In June, Ms. Lauretti inaugurated a homey five-room bed-and-breakfast here, crafted from a hulking barn that once housed 20 dairy cows. But before she could get a loan to do the work, she said, her husband, who works for the state railroad, had to offer a guarantee, “even though I owned the land and the house.”

She is the third generation to take over the farmstead, just a short drive from Sabaudia, a popular beach midway between Rome and Naples. Her grandmother, Maria Fia, now 91, still shuffles through the farmyard with the help of a cane.

Ms. Lauretti’s 16-year-old daughter, Giulia, is studying for a pedagogical high school diploma so she can open a day-care center on the farm when she graduates, “even though there’s a lot of bureaucracy involved in that,” Ms. Lauretti said.

And she is still unsure that the gamble will pay off. “It’s taken a lot of money, and a lot of hard work,” Ms. Lauretti said.

Her mother and co-farmhand, Iolanda Di Girolamo, echoed that sentiment: “Sacrifices, many, many sacrifices.”

A version of this article appeared in print on January 4, 2012, in The International Herald Tribune.

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