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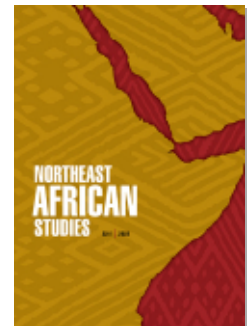
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Accounting for Textile Industry and Labor Dynamics in  
Eritrea (1956–1975): Adding Gender to the Equation

Valentina Fusari

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# Accounting for Textile Industry and Labor Dynamics in Eritrea (1956–1975): Adding Gender to the Equation

VALENTINA FUSARI  
*University of Turin*

## ABSTRACT

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*In Eritrea, the history of the textile sector has its roots in the local tradition of spinning and weaving, which assigned roles based on gender and ethnicity. The textile supply chain, instead, was anchored in colonial times, when local market and export-oriented factories emerged, hiring women because of the shortage of male workers and because they could be paid less. From then on it provided women with salaried jobs, upskilling their opportunities and raising their awareness. This article is a factory-based case study that intertwines archival, oral, and visual sources. Its aim is to assess how and why, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, the inclusion of women as salaried workers in the S.A. Cotonificio Barattolo & Co. (Asmāra), one of the main textile factories in East Africa, made it a gender-oriented factoryscape that affected the role of women well beyond the labor arena. It examines the recruitment and training processes, the socialization of women as salaried employees, their spatial and social mobility, their reconciliation between productive and reproductive roles,*

*and both their overt and underground resistances. Barattolo is a valuable case study for highlighting gendered labor dynamics from a female perspective.*

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### **Introduction: Weaving Gendered Labor Stories**

Although wide-ranging scholarship already exists on the participation of women in African wage labor, the stories of Aster, Bisrat, Lemlem, and their colleagues still await being told. Likewise, discussion about the feminization of the workforce in global manufacturing industries has provided fruitful insights into recruitment systems, wages, exploitation, and empowerment through the lens of gender, but almost no light has been shed on the situation in Eritrea. Most of the studies cover the colonial period<sup>1</sup> or—more recently—the global value and commodity chains.<sup>2</sup> This article contributes to the debate by painting a picture of women’s wage labor in the Eritrean textile sector from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. This was an important period for the country: politically, a dual transition took place through the federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1952–62) and the subsequent annexation of Eritrea as the fourteenth province of the Ethiopian Empire (1962), up to the rise of the Derg regime (1974), which overthrew Ḥaylä Śəllase amid mass protests and adopted Marxism-Leninism as a political ideology. Further, these transitions intersected with the growing activities of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), whose aim was to defeat “Ethiopian colonialism.”<sup>3</sup> In economic terms, Eritrea experienced an industrial revolution driven by state-supported investments. The textile sector was both the matrix and the beneficiary of that revolution.<sup>4</sup> In social terms, with the departure of many Italians after the Second World War, lifestyles among Eritreans were diversifying and spawning new social groups, especially in the urban setting, through greater participation in the country’s economic and political life.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1950s, a convergence of factors—Eritrea’s strategic geographical position, infrastructures and professional skills of the labor force, entrepreneurial appeal and access to capital—resulted in the consolidation and birth of industrial poles capable of decisively improving the employment rate of the local population. Asmāra, the city of women, which owed its birth to the

female component of the Asmə'a, Sərənsər, Šəlälä, and Gwərättom clans, which opted for the union to preserve peace,<sup>6</sup> experienced a phase in which they would again play a prominent role as workers and citizens.

In this scenario, Roberto Barattolo, an Italian trader who came to Eritrea in the mid-1930s,<sup>7</sup> capitalized on the Eritrean infrastructure network, transforming a foreign-financed program of imports into an export scheme by taking over a factory that dated back to the early twentieth century and starting up, in the mid-1950s, the country's first textile factory equipped with modern cotton ginning and spinning machines, which he named the *S.A. Cotonificio Barattolo & Co.* (hereafter Barattolo). From the available documents it is unclear whether this venture was financed by the Italian government,<sup>8</sup> but it certainly benefited from the partnership with Ḥaylä Šəllase's family to smooth over any political obstacles (see Figure 1).<sup>9</sup> Barattolo soon became one of the most important industrial plants in the Horn of Africa, reorganizing production strategies and modes of control, as well as modifying labor relationships by altering the normative role women played in the society as they became the main workforce in the sector.<sup>10</sup> The Eritrean government of that period injected US\$315,000 into the company between 1956 and 1961, i.e., 30 percent of its capital. After starting to produce cotton in Mersa Gulbub (1958), in April 1959, Roberto Barattolo, thanks to a US\$500,000 loan from the U.S. Development Loan Fund, launched the company *S.A. Sviluppo Agricolo Industriale dell'Eritrea* (SAIDE),<sup>11</sup> which annexed the cotton mill. A subsequent "Ethiopianization" program got under way, in which major industries—especially in the textile, leather, and food sectors—at the time owned by foreign investors had to sell part of their shares to Ethiopians, primarily those who had ties to the royal family.<sup>12</sup> The Imperial Investment Decree 51/1963<sup>13</sup> further encouraged foreign and local investments by providing assistance and various types of tax exemptions, thus bringing about, between 1962 and 1965, Eritrea's industrial revival and low unemployment, also thanks to the form of protectionism it adopted, which eliminated foreign competition.<sup>14</sup> Although Italians were losing their hold on small and medium enterprises, the Ethiopian government continued to encourage relocation and Ethiopianization, granting new opportunities for large industrial groups in partnership with Ethiopian entrepreneurs. Indeed, even in the 1960s, despite the exodus of many Italians and the



**FIGURE 1.** His Imperial Majesty and Roberto Barattolo in the Factory at Asmāra during Expo 1972. Source: ©Antioco Lusci per Etiopia Illustrata.

closure of several businesses, Eritrea witnessed a further growth of larger companies with Italian shareholding: between 1964 and 1968, thirty-seven new industrial enterprises were established in various sectors, like textiles, food, cement products among the main ones.<sup>15</sup>

This alliance contributed, in the light industry sector, to consolidating and feminizing the workforce. Although the textile industry created about 4,000 new manufacturing jobs by the late 1960s, around 70 percent of these were low-wage positions held by girls and women. In the ebullient urban areas, the use of female labor led to a social transformation, due to the change in labor relations, material conditions and work sites, as well as the redefinition of the role of women, especially from the growth of cotton goods manufactures. In 1965, there were twenty-three textile companies in Ethiopia, of which ten in Asmāra. In this phase, SAIDE expanded further to include a weaving factory with dyeing, printing, and finishing departments, with the subsequent additions of weaving and knitwear packaging departments. The industrial complex initially used only a small quantity of

locally cultivated raw materials, until Roberto Barattolo took over the *Società Imprese Africane* (SIA)<sup>16</sup> in 1965 and assigned its main cotton production to the “company town” of ‘Aligədər in the western lowlands, supplying SAIDE exclusively with local raw materials. This move allowed the company to cover the complete manufacturing cycle and export finished products to Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, making Eritrea part of a broader economic circuit, up to the factory’s nationalization in 1975.<sup>17</sup>

Barattolo’s productions, in addition to requiring huge funds and important infrastructural arrangements, also needed “the body of work.” As Massimo Zaccaria has noted in his history of the Eritrean food canning industry,<sup>18</sup> women were well-represented in the country’s first industrial experiences. They had never been simply onlookers in the local labor market, but their entry into the wage labor sector, which required them to adapt to and integrate into a new work environment, had significant consequences on gender roles in the private and public spheres.<sup>19</sup> Phyllis Kaberry, in her pioneering work on gender studies in Africa, put forward the idea that gender was built both by local culture and particular historical contingencies, adding that women’s position and role could not be understood outside the social institutions and the political economy in force.<sup>20</sup> The nature of patriarchal behavioral patterns in relation to capitalist labor systems in Africa has been explored by Elizabeth Schmidt and Judith Van Allen, who have also investigated women’s resistance to attempts at undermining their contribution to production as laborers.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have claimed that European colonialism reduced the strictness of kinship bonds and engendered new exigencies, thereby enabling women to enter the wage labor market,<sup>22</sup> but the context in question shows how the phase following European colonialism was more important for the job opportunities it offered women and for altering parental responsibilities.

Relevant archival documents preserved at the Eritrean National Chamber of Commerce (Asmāra) and in private archives (Asmāra, Addis Ababa, Bergamo, Milan) have been reviewed, in addition to ministerial, diplomatic, and agency reports and correspondence. Resorting to such sources, I have tried to guesstimate the total number of workers, but I do not claim that the figures are entirely accurate because they are subject to scant archival records and presumably even to seasonality. I have made up for the paucity

of archival sources by resorting to oral and visual testimonies to obtain first-hand insights into the “constitutive complexities” that characterized the lived experiences of female wage earners over time in the Eritrean urban space. Thus, I have prioritized a methodological approach that made it possible to assemble micro-histories of labor from heterogeneous and fragmentary sources. Indeed, the analysis of “whispers and silences” reveals much about the stresses and strains associated with labor opportunities from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s in Eritrea, because the interest in “those who would rather forget” and the marginalized or invisibilized mainly lies in oral data, while acknowledging the limitations of oral history as a source.<sup>23</sup> As Martin A. Klein highlighted, there is a large body of data that people hold in memory. It concerns information about individual and collective experience, but it is not preserved in any formal way because it is not deliberately structured for legitimation or communication. Yet, it is essential for the reconstruction of the history of “peoples without history,” of those low down in any economic and social order.<sup>24</sup>

Because this is an empirical study conducted mainly in Asmāra in 2013–14, replete with further material gathered in Ethiopia and Italy between 2018 and 2022, ethnographic practice and the multivocal approach have been effective to outline the urban environment and the factoryscape from the workers’ perspective. Thus, I resorted to extensive oral history, with the complexity that this entails. The interviews with the workers were conducted more than forty years after their factory experiences. Such a time frame led female workers to revise their memories and rephrase their experiences in light of personal and professional commitments in later life. Even so, by drawing on eighteen in-depth interviews with former factory workers, the staff of the Eritrean National Chamber of Commerce and the entrepreneur who took over the company in 2004, I recalled personal and professional trajectories untraceable within the archive. In addition to fieldnotes and informal communications, such interviews, conducted in Italian, English, or Tegrēña (in the last case with the help of an informal mediator), and lasted an average of two hours, have been conducted at interviewees’ homes (nine) and in public places (five). In four cases, however, interviews were carried out in Barattolo, the previous workplace, so that the space evoked memories; at the same time, the interviewees described the processes and relationships

that took place within it. Respondents were identified and contacted mainly through snowball sampling, whereas visual material, like photographs, was shared to stimulate memories.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, work songs (*wefera*) that came to light during interviews with former workers are an especially relevant source, here treated for the content they convey when I address the issues of resistance and awareness that took place at the workplace. Such a source would deserve an ethnomusicological analysis, which could reveal further details about the work experience and specific musical performance. However, I find it important to emphasize that these work songs, which refer to the *wefera* tradition, used to be sung during daily activities, like plowing and harvesting, or building and fixing houses, have come out of the traditional context in which they were performed and have made their appearance in another working context, that of the factory. As a result, in their working hours women sang as a motivation for the work but also to belittle their foremen.

By triangulating the above-mentioned sources, I have assembled a micro-spatial herstory of global labor<sup>26</sup> by weaving together the gendered stories of female workers to give texture to the complex transformations that occurred in twentieth-century Eritrea. Indeed, the “Barattolo case study” offers a useful window into the herstories of female African workers in a context of tensions and transitions. What is original about this article is that until now no study has been devoted to female labor in any specific sector of Eritrea, in contrast to those dealing with neighboring contexts or later periods.<sup>27</sup> The article focuses on three intertwined thematic clusters. The first thematic cluster explores how the textile industry influenced the urban and social infrastructure of Asmāra. The second thematic cluster deals with recruitment system, the deployment of the female workforce and skills acquisition within the factory. The third thematic cluster examines, from the women’s perspective, the forms of resistance—on a different scale—and sexual harassment, that occurred in the “factoryscape,” understood as a physical and social space that encouraged the socialization of wage labor, interactions among the workforce, and the realization of different life trajectories.



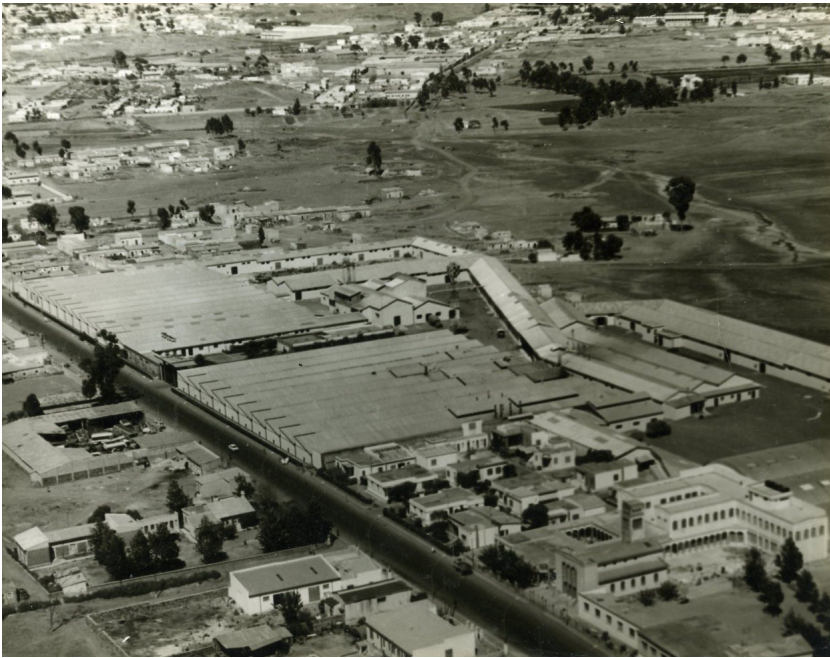
## **Enda Barattolo Side Stories: Urban Environment as Social Infrastructure in Asmāra**

As Mia Fuller argues, traces of Italy's colonial ventures are ubiquitous in Asmāra,<sup>28</sup> but the impact of the industrial sector's later spatial organization also deserves to be investigated. The productive identity of Asmāra's flourishing textile industrial center<sup>29</sup> has remained both in its urban toponymy and in the memory of its citizens. In fact, together with the tangible aspects, such as the construction of industrial complexes, intangibles also emerge in the major social impacts that a company exerts in the context in which it roots itself, promoting changes that go beyond purely economic ones.

Studies on Italian entrepreneurship in the Horn of Africa have focused almost exclusively on the activities and recollections of Italians, perpetuating the very self-centeredness that shaped and limited the previous colonial outlook.<sup>30</sup> However, the stories concerning Enda Barattolo,<sup>31</sup> as part of the Godayf district where the plant is located is still commonly called today (see Figure 2), have up to now remained untold, dealing with professional and personal trajectories, especially those of workers who were at the lower end of the production ladder and mainly employed in clothing and textile industries that replicated their domestic duties.<sup>32</sup>

This change in gender roles was intertwined with the transformations that Asmāra itself was experiencing. Between 1941 and 1946, during the British Military Administration, Italians' businesses, from agricultural to mechanical, developed at its highest level, even compared to Italian colonialism, so much so that it ended up building the base of Eritrean light industry, which at the beginning of the 1970s still represented about 35 percent of Ethiopian industry.<sup>33</sup> In the 1940s, Asmāra grew because about 90 percent of Italians residing in Eritrea and Ethiopia decided to move there after Italy lost its colonies in the Horn of Africa (1941) or to return following the Second World War as well as because of the troubling socioeconomic conditions the characterized Europe in the early years of its reconstruction. Yet, this trend began to change in the late 1950s, when several Italian entrepreneurs decided to move to Ethiopia, attracted by the investment opportunities promoted by Ḥaylā Śəllase. With the increasing power centralization of Addis Ababa, the Italian community in Eritrea fell to about 7,000 people, mostly residing in

Asmāra. The Italian community was made up for the most part of families of civil servants, entrepreneurs, and skilled experts born or established during Italian colonialism, who had managed to consolidate their position under the British Administration. Meanwhile, the city continued to expand, increasing its cosmopolitan character, thanks to the Indian, Greek, and Yemeni communities, as well as the presence of the U.S. military base with over 5,000 people. Furthermore, it remained a pole of attraction for Eritrean labor migrants, including young women from the surrounding rural areas looking for job opportunities.



**FIGURE 2.** Aerial Southern View of Barattolo's Manufacturing Plant in Godayf, 1975. Note. Barattolo employed around 12,000 workers over two decades, ranging from 250 in mid-1950s to around 3,000 in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Source: Cotonificio Barattolo & Co. Sh. Co. Ethiopia, Documentazione fotografica. Allegato no. 2: Alla perizia estimativa dei beni patrimoniali industriali di proprietà della "Cotonificio Barattolo & Co. Sh. Co.," Gennaio 1975, Perito Estimatore Dott. Ing. F. Mazzola.

Unfortunately, despite the fragmentary documentation saved and stored by the Research and Documentation Center in Asmāra, it is not possible to draft a reliable figure about the interventions and the projects implemented by the Eritrean government during the federation (1952–62), nor following its annexation to Ethiopia.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, documented facts dating from the 1950s suggest that Asmāra's cityscape, not only in its toponomy, but also to accommodate the intensified traffic flow and new industrial needs, as well as the increased urban population, underwent an infrastructural and social transformation.

Although the female workers' stories are an integral part of the productivity and therefore of the success of Italian entrepreneurs who remained and invested in Eritrea,<sup>35</sup> the scarcity of sources and the difficulties in locating them have created a bias in scholarly research into Eritrea's labor history. Further, in available studies, the spotlight on female workers has been obscured by their early colonial subject status and later by their commitment as freedom fighters, neglecting the factory as a space animated by the central role that women played therein. The work environment, especially if outside the home, like the urban scape, was a crucial arena for interactions among different components of society. They were also important spaces for acquiring new technical skills and meta-competences (e.g., learning how to respect timing and adapt their movements to the working spaces and conditions) through specific training practices and disciplines of body and mind that have forged "the African industrial woman."<sup>36</sup> Besides, comparing oneself with one's peers, transferring ideas, and sharing experiences with people of different origins and backgrounds made the time to and from the workplace and that spent in the factory itself privileged occasions for acquiring awareness and responsibilities that went beyond the context and the period under observation.

Since Ester Boserup wrote her *Woman's Role in Economic Development*,<sup>37</sup> "feminization of labor" has shown a sharp increase in female participation in the formal labor market, together with a shift from the agricultural to the industrial sector and an increased flexibility in the work roles of men and women. This aspect allows us to evaluate how, in certain historical phases, companies have both preferred female labor, thus granting their access to the so-called formal labor market, and resorted—in time of need—to

noncontractual labor in order to meet fluctuating demand, thus generating flexibility through an “as needed” approach. Feminization and flexibility shaped a twofold process involving the recruitment of a female workforce even in the Eritrean textile sector. As in other African contexts (e.g., Lesotho, South Africa),<sup>38</sup> women were massively recruited into the textile industries, becoming permanent workers with wages alongside their male counterparts, although in less skilled and less remunerative positions. In addition, young girls and women with children floated around the factories, occasionally doing unskilled and underpaid jobs (e.g., daily cleaners, street vendors). In this regard, Mehari, a thirteen-year-old Asmarino boy in the mid-1960s, recalled that he was used to wandering about the main gate of the factory early in the morning when cotton cargos arrived to make a little money by unloading the trucks. He also remembered that very young girls were asked to clean the yard in return for what amounted to pocket money, but none of them were formally employed in the factory.<sup>39</sup>

The entry of female labor into the industrial manufacturing sector enabled employers to pay them lower wages, hence reducing production costs, and to take advantage of their legendary dexterity and docility. Yet, in reviewing the life experiences of Eritrean workers, we can assess how these desirable traits were clearly produced by a fortuitous intersection between the gender ideologies forged by girls socialized within their families and communities, and the circumstances of the labor market. Gender stereotypes made women “ideal candidates” for manufacturing jobs, because they were seen as compliant, hardworking, and docile, by nature devoted to textile work, uninterested in trade unions, and embodying a replaceable commodity. There was an upsurge in the demand for and supply of female labor to be steered into poorly paid economic sectors where women often had to put up with deplorable working conditions and few legal protections. But even though docility and “nimble fingers” were valued traits by the Tegrēña society of the plateau and by the company cadres, what emerges from the experiences of women were forms of awareness, resistance, and small acts of sabotage.

Also, from the perspective of female workers, there were other causes that favored the emergence of “pink ghettos” in the Asmāra suburbs. This term, coined for positions typically held by women, describes jobs and

career areas historically considered women's work, and included textile manufacturing, where they experienced challenges such as poor pay, heavy workloads, and lower status by contract, or nontenure. As a result, such workplaces and sectors, as well as the abuses experienced therein, are gender oriented. Among other explanations, it is important to note that Eritrean women were entering the urban labor market by necessity as much as by permission. Although light industries were looking for cheap labor, the loosening of family restrictions and control over women might have resulted from an increasing number of female-headed households. European colonialism, an important agent of change, had already caused an imbalance in the composition of the colonial population, with particular regard to urbanization and sex ratio, especially in urban environment. As men joined the colonial army (i.e., *askari*), women managed their households, particularly during faraway military campaigns. Since then, women in charge of managing the family because of divorce, separation, male migration, and widowhood—or their daughters—had to work because of a shortage of male breadwinners. Also, some just wanted to enter the wage labor market to increase their earning potential to finance their future life projects, such as contributing to a dowry, learning a trade, or waiting to come of age to migrate elsewhere. Hence, some women were driven by poverty, having no better option than to seek employment in an exploitative industry, while others were motivated by a desire for autonomy through earning their own livelihood and acquiring marketable skills. As a result, the female labor force gravitating around the manufacturing industries in Asmara was various: on the one hand, it contributed to creating greater pressure on resources; on the other hand, it made urban and working spaces places of negotiation.

These elements, together with the expansion of Barattolo's production stages and the constant demand and supply of labor, favored the creation of a new "social identity," that of a female urban working class that, albeit very dynamic because of the high turnover rates that undermined workforce stability and productivity levels, was gaining momentum.

### “Those Bad Barattolo Girls”: Recruitment Issues and Other Tales

At this point, it is essential to understand how the girls accessed factory work, namely how the recruitment process was managed and what dynamics inside and outside the company it entailed. It is also interesting to analyze the makeup of the working population, how it was “socialized” to work in the factory, and the meaning that this experience had for women from different backgrounds. Apart from gender, variables such as age, education, household size, marital status, residence, and networking influenced the dynamics inside and outside of the factory.

Gender-based structural discrimination in the family and society had negative effects at the workplace and created a disadvantageous situation for female workers. Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson have argued that the problem of women’s subordination did not stem from their lack of job opportunities but rather from the “relations through which women are ‘integrated’ into the development process.”<sup>40</sup> Their recruitment at Barattolo paralleled the pattern of women’s subordinate position within the society and the extended family. Yet, at the same time, it was an opportunity to challenge both the patriarchal order and to gain political awareness.

The testimony of female workers relates those girls drew on their connections with relatives and friends to be recruited and—vice versa—the skilled workers acted as recruiters within their family and social circle. As Aklilu, now a retired textile mechanic in his late seventies whose mother was a former employee at Barattolo and who was educated at the textile technical institute in Addis Ababa in the mid-1960s, where he also worked before returning to Eritrea, recalled that, when necessary, the managers told the workers that the company needed to hire girls, indicating the day and time for the selection.<sup>41</sup> Among these girls was also Aster, a fourteen-year-old girl in the early 1960s, who was used to help her widowed mother of a young *askari*. When her mother remarried and had two more children, she repeatedly asked Aster for help in house chores and for looking after the babies. Hence, Aster decided to drop out of the school she attended in Sant’Antonio, near Barattolo, and went for an interview to support economically her mother and half-brothers. On that occasion, the selectors made fun of her because she was considered too scrawny for the job she would have to do, but the

fortuitous presence of a family friend favored her hiring.<sup>42</sup> On other occasions, as Aklilu further explained, men had to guarantee the safety of women in the workplace, not so much by ensuring that it was not a dangerous job, but that the honor of the girls—and therefore of the families—would not be compromised.<sup>43</sup> Hence intermediaries (ደለልቲ, *delelati*) did not interact directly with the girls but rather with their families, presenting themselves as the moral guardians of recruitable girls.<sup>44</sup> The factory and the tasks to be performed, but above all the environment (together with the city and the urban lifestyle), were presented as being safe for women, especially single girls. The *delelati*, to seal their intervention on behalf of the girls, sometimes asked the families for money or—as emerged in a couple of interviews—requested, unbeknownst to their families, sexual favors from the girls in exchange for urging their preferential treatment during the selections.<sup>45</sup> Thus, female workers were recruited more through recommendations and informal channels than through scouting for the best candidates. As a result, the work environment, made up of young female workers between fourteen and fifty-five years of age, but mainly under twenty, because it was believed that younger women took more readily to the work, became prevalent. Workers with family ties (e.g., aunts, cousins, more rarely mothers and daughters from the surrounding neighborhood) and with friends or neighborhood ties, frequently occupied different positions in the company hierarchy.

Since the 1950s, the Eritrean population has increased, with a strong focus on urbanization stemming from the intense transformations fostered by its dynamic industrial sector. For the first time, a considerable number of Eritreans experienced what it was like to work in a factory. In the early-1960s, around 30,000 Eritrean workers were involved in the industrial sector.<sup>46</sup> Despite not having available the company's registry books, which would have made it possible to reconstruct the exact numbers, makeup, and dynamics of the female workforce, the documents of the Asmara Chamber of Commerce, and the recollections and photographic material allow us to make some estimates and considerations. For example, regarding workforce numbers, the cotton mill initially employed 250 workers. In the second half of the 1950s, Barattolo employed about 600 Eritreans and 30 foreigners. In 1962, it employed 1,771 Eritreans and 40 foreigners; 2,596 Eritreans and 54 foreigners in 1963; and 2,301 Eritreans and 61 foreigners in 1964, to reach over

3,000 workers with the expansion of the production chain (3,399 Eritreans and 86 foreigners in 1965). In 1975, when the company was nationalized and renamed the *Asmara Textile Factory*, it employed around 2,400 workers. In about twenty years of activity, its female Eritrean workforce fluctuated between 70 and 75 percent.<sup>47</sup> Further, the men were on average older than the women. Compared to the colonial past, a marker of change is the fact that it was no longer the former colonial soldiers who mediated with the Italian entrepreneurs, hence the recruitment system did no longer imply a relation to the former colonial state, although social relations and neighborhood might ease the connections to enter the manufacturing labor. An aspect of continuity, on the other hand, was the use of the Italian language in the transmission of technical knowledge and know-how that inevitably referred to the Italian presence and entrepreneurship, as well as to their education system. As a result, skilled laborers (e.g., mechanics, carpenters) were almost totally males who entered the factory after having attended vocational schools (e.g., *Scuola secondaria di avviamento professionale a tipo industriale*) or having worked at other companies and garages.<sup>48</sup> Women, instead, at their time of hiring, were younger and with little or no schooling. Some, in fact, did not go beyond elementary school or abandoned middle school to seek factory work and contribute to the family income. A few mixed-race girls were employed as clerk, shedding light on both a still-racialized hierarchy in a postcolonial environment and on pink collar workers who aspired to social mobility through labor.<sup>49</sup> Not even the older female workers were as old as the upper age group of the men, suggesting that many women left their jobs at Barattolo to take up others in Eritrea or elsewhere, or to devote themselves to their families after marriage or pregnancy; and that women belonging to the older generations entered the labor market to meet family needs, especially if they were widows with young children. Marital status and number of children limited the opportunities of women to enter the formal labor market.<sup>50</sup> Thus, in the 1960s and early 1970s, Barattolo often became a resource mainly for unmarried and underage girls, because child-care responsibilities were associated with lower employment probability, despite the higher stability of female breadwinners, whose salary was often the sole family income.



The origin of the workforce does not seem to show changes over time. Distance from the workplace varied between those who lived in the Godayf neighborhood and in other working-class neighborhoods, such as Gäğärät, Gäza Banda, Abba Šawl, or Ḥaz Ḥaz (defined by the Italian colonial-era master plans as *quartieri indigeni*), which took no more than an hour's walk to get to work, to those who came “from rural outskirts” (i.e., “villages outside Asmära”) that would be about 20 km from the workplace.<sup>51</sup> In the late 1960s, single women began to rent a *quattro per quattro* (i.e., a single room in a shared house) in Godayf and in the initial housing unit of Kahawta, both in the area of Barattolo. These girls could only afford to share a house, but they were experiencing an urban lifestyle, which allowed them more freedom, even in terms of intimate relationships.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, they could avoid the various dangers on their way to the workplace, especially sexual assaults, still recalled today with great emotional stress, but that never came to light because no official reports were made.<sup>53</sup> Such dangers were partially mitigated by the “shuttle service” that Barattolo introduced to ensure that workers arrived punctually, well-rested, and ready for a productive workday.



**FIGURE 3.** Palazzo, the Barattolo’s double decker, which replaced ‘akəbärätə in driving workers to the factory in the early 1960s. Source: © Byniam.

The service, initially operated by a truck “like those that bricklayers use,”<sup>54</sup> which the girls had baptized አክበረት (*‘akəbärätə*, she who supports), was later replaced by *Palazzo*, a company-owned double decker (see Figure 3).

Another factor that made it difficult to stabilize the workforce was wages, which differed by gender. The men, with the exception of security jobs (e.g., guards and gatekeepers) and manual jobs (e.g., unloaders), were skilled workers and foremen whose duties required different degrees of responsibility along the production chain. The women, on the other hand, were generally unskilled workers, a difference reflected in the wage gap. In 1956, the average salary was between ETH \$0.25 to 0.45 per day. In the late 1950s, men earned around ETH \$0.30–0.50 per day and women ETH \$0.20–0.35 per day. In 1964, in the weaving session a male beginner earned ETH \$1.38 per day whereas a woman earned ETH \$0.80, and during the Derg regime the daily wage at the factory ranged from ETH \$2.00 to 10.00 for men and from ETH \$1.92 to 5.00 for women. Although their salaries were higher under the Derg, the cost of living was also higher, and thus workers’ living conditions seemed better under Ḥaylā Śəllase than when the Derg seized power. Moreover, during the Derg regime the workday went from eight hours to twelve. The little money that the women earned went for domestic upkeep. The girls worked to help out in the family, and when they got their wages after queuing up and receiving an envelope marked with their registry number, they handed it over to their mothers.<sup>55</sup> Other girls, usually those who report having done factory work in their twenties, also recall saving part of the salary to buy gold jewelry and fabrics, and to get their hair done for special occasions, such as weddings or religious holidays.<sup>56</sup>

Although working in the industrial sector allowed women to distance themselves from patriarchal control and to gain a relatively autonomous empowerment, it also created other forms of subalternity, because these women remained subordinated to a hierarchical—and even racial—organization within the factory. Indeed, it reflected the internal stratification of Eritrean highlands (*kebessa*) society, in which white foreigners still enjoyed a high economic and social status compared to the indigenous population, in which men—and work done by men—were valued more than women, and in which the values of the elderly were held in higher regard than those of the young. In such an organization, young workers were the most vulnerable, and

yet factory work enabled women to rethink and reconcile their productive and reproductive roles, within the family and society, as well as their social and political roles as citizens, within the nationalist movements.

The Italian technicians, still present in various companies, complained about “the indolence of the workers, the fact that it took months before they were able to learn the ropes and acquire skills, to the point of seeming to do so on purpose and not because they had learning deficits.”<sup>57</sup> As can be seen from Aklilu’s account, young women would rarely start out with any technical skills, and so started in the simplest, most monotonous and lowest-paid jobs, after which, enduring within the company and showing an aptitude for work, were promoted to jobs that were better-paid and involved greater responsibility, including training newcomers or simple secretarial jobs that required literacy skills, such as keeping electricity meter records.<sup>58</sup> Such an



**FIGURE 4.** Spinning department: Eritrean workers and an Italian instructor, 1956. Source: © Paolo.

upgrade, on the one hand, was a source of pride for the worker, but it also became a reason for derision by other girls who saw a change in attitude and superiority towards them in their former colleague.<sup>59</sup> When discussing their life stories, Barattolo workers relate that many had previous informal work experience, such as in agriculture,<sup>60</sup> whereas for others it was their first work experience. Once in the factory, the young women had to quickly integrate into the social fabric of the workers and learn the job for which they were hired. The interviewees, while having no precise recollection of the length of their apprenticeship—which they experienced with a mixture of fear, excitement, and curiosity—recall a “teacher who wore an apron” who would demonstrate the work procedure just once, and having to learn quickly in order not to be fined if they were not sufficiently productive,<sup>61</sup> a punitive practice held over from the colonial period.<sup>62</sup> For example, for a short time Alhem was assigned to cleaning the workspace. Later she teamed up with Betlehem, who, after showing her how to operate the machinery she had to use, suggested she observe the two girls next to her to learn and be corrected if she made mistakes.<sup>63</sup> Hence learning work tasks and technical operations was not based on any company investment in catch-up know-how, but took place through on-the-job training (see Figure 4).

The workday lasted eight hours, organized in three shifts (6am—2pm; 2pm–10pm; 10pm–6am), without any breaks other than “two minutes to go to the bathroom” or “for a five-minute tea.”<sup>64</sup> For anything else they were harshly reprimanded, and their wages were curtailed.<sup>65</sup> Besides those who were hired with a regular contract, some women were recruited for day jobs not requiring any special skills and that sometimes took place in the open areas or in the factory warehouses. This “floating” labor was generally available outside the company. Nighisti recalls that “some of these girls were also hired permanently,” but “there were so many of us that I can’t remember them all!”<sup>66</sup>

The female workers admit that although the work environment—especially for certain production stages, such as spinning—could be unhealthy due to the loud noise and the waste material in the air, for which they were not given any protection, or the milk they requested, which was considered helpful for exposure to toxic fumes.<sup>67</sup> However, from their stories it seems that this awareness took a while to develop, especially among those

who had work experiences outside Eritrea. At that time, though workplace hazards were somewhat taken in consideration, health measures did not seem particularly urgent. But although the interviewees did not consider the tasks they had to perform complex or particularly risky, they recalled various work accidents, often disabling, and some even fatal, when they were removed from the area while technicians and company executives restored the production line.<sup>68</sup>

### **Herstories of Resistance and Memories of Sexual Harassment**

This study is part of a line of research dealing with the resistance of female workers in Africa to patriarchal domination, company exploitation, and political power. I focus here on female workers in the urban environment, some of whom surmounted the obstructivism of men and the elderly to engage in wage employment. I also treat other sorts of resistance by investigating how women reacted to the company hierarchy and the nationalist cause. Such resistance attitudes and practices were mainly informal and even went undocumented, but the approach adopted in this study has made it possible to capture different levels and modes of resistance. First, the life stories of these women reveal the difficulties they were up against as young girls in getting hired and enduring at Barattolo. Second, the women reacted to the injustices, disrespectful behavior, and exploitation in the factory by committing daily acts of casual resistance, individually or in groups, against management, such as insolence and loitering during work hours, and collective protests to their supervisors. Moreover, in alternate periods, given the disciplinary actions inflicted on them over time, the workers were able to experiment with more formal acts of resistance, operating in synergy and engaging in strikes or other organized strategies, and developing both a political and class consciousness, because unionism was the spearhead of the Eritrean liberation struggle.

As Luul Gebreab, former chairperson of the National Union of Eritrean Women, has pointed out, women found themselves bearing a triple burden: care of the home, social obligations, and paid labor. Their having to take on domestic chores, to be the fulcrum of sociality—as part of their responsibility to maintain social cohesion, whether through neighborhood rituals or in

their villages of origin<sup>69</sup>—and at the same to become breadwinners, were deeply embedded in the local gender-role system as well as in the shortage of men due to male migration to the Gulf States, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, or because they had joined the liberation fronts. Thus, the shortage of men and the increasingly female-headed households characterized (and still characterizes) Eritrea’s urban areas.<sup>70</sup>

The patriarchal society of the *kebessa* influenced job opportunities and the strategies women used to manage the money they earned. Despite the obstructionist attempts by men and the elderly, women struggled to overcome the barriers of the established patriarchal order. The choice—or need—to get a salaried factory job, although a boon to the household, often met with stiff resistance from male relatives.<sup>71</sup> The need for mediation and to have moral guardians as chaperones outside the domestic environment, the experiences of sexual harassment by male workers, employers, and even ordinary people, did not favor the perception that a factory was a safe environment, but led to considering female workers as not being very respectable.

Generally oppressive and exploitative conditions, exposure to sexual harassment, and the stigma that accompanied female workers incurred the disappointment of relatives and those who already worked in the factory when they discovered a girl had been hired. As Aster recalls, the reaction of Rezene, a cousin of hers who was a foreman at Barattolo, when she was hired, was far from positive. He did not approve of the decision, saying it was not a proper place for a girl, and that she should have asked him before showing up for the selections, that she would have a bad time there, and that surely there were other kinds of work more suitable for a girl.<sup>72</sup>

The labor market and the factoryscape were not gender-neutral, because they reflected social and cultural norms and practices, so that the increasing participation of women in the wage economy did not free them from their subordination, because the patriarchal order extended to the factory. Hence young women found themselves having to resist patriarchal attitudes, which preferred them to be employed in informal jobs to reconcile productive and reproductive roles, or be totally devoted to caregiver activities carried out in the home. They also had to face the social stigma of working in an environment that, according to local values, was perceived as lacking in social

respectability. This element also emerges from the words of Aklilu, who states with some embarrassment that he would never have sent his daughters to work in the factory, because it was not a suitable job for young women.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it emerged from the interviewees that on the way to work, many had repeatedly risked rape, sometimes thwarted by calling out to other women. For example, Ruth shared that when she has been hired by Barattolo as a sixteen-year-old in 1962, her major fear, which accompanied her until the last working day at the factory in 1969, was to reach the workplace for the night shift or return home at the end of the afternoon shift, when it was dark. In fact, in Abba Šawl, the neighborhood where she lived with her parents and six brothers, the disgraceful death of a twenty-year-old employee of Barattolo was well-known: she had died because of a rape while returning from work. The girl had in fact tried to defend herself, but the aggressor, a middle-aged drunk man who had apparently spent the evening in a ቤት ስዋ (*biet swa*, traditional beer shop), hit her with a stone in the head, causing a fatal wound. Due to the hustle and bustle neighbors came out, but it was too late.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, the trip itself was recalled by some as grueling. In one example, workers had to cross foul-smelling drains from other companies or ditches that served as open-air sewers, as recalled by this saying among the workers: “How can I cross Melotti’s foul-smelling drains to go to ፎንዳ ባራቲዎ.”<sup>75</sup>

Also, because of the reputation of “those bad Barattolo girls,”<sup>76</sup> they were blackmailed or stigmatized. Aster still recalls the people in Godayf, lying in wait for the girls at the ends of their shifts, especially in the evening, who chanted choruses such as: “The female workers of Barattolo are beautiful, but they all are tramps.”<sup>77</sup> All the interviewees hastened to specify that “they were not tramps, they were just working girls,”<sup>78</sup> but that some were forced to follow the men waiting outside the factory, whereas others, subjected to sexual violence, lost all respectability in the eyes of the community to which they belonged, and saw their eventual marriage prospects dashed. Thus, female Eritrean workers recount different forms of gender-based violence that left them with social and psychological scars long after their period of employment at the factory.

The disadvantageous working conditions to which they were subjected stimulated both an awareness of the exploitation they were undergoing

and the will to explore other job opportunities, thanks to the skills acquired in the factory. In their quest for emancipation, the workers had to put up with a dual subordination in the factory: compliance with the methods and priorities of the company owners, and obedience to the older men or women who had supervisory positions within the production chain. Although, as Mesfin Araya argues, the European colonial projects in Eritrea did nothing to nurture a stable Eritrean working class,<sup>79</sup> in the following decades such a class did in fact take shape, even with an important female component. The urban workers of that period became aware of their role, responsibilities, and potential, both inside and outside of the workplace. And this awareness was also expressed by rhyming chants they addressed to both Italian managers and supervisory figures. Giuseppe Simoncini,<sup>80</sup> the general manager, whom many workers considered “mean” because he would habitually check on their work at the end of each shift and apply fines, was ridiculed for his physical appearance and urged to go back to Italy: “Simoncini, with your big thighs, it is better if you go back home [to Italy].”<sup>81</sup>

The chants did not spare even the foremen, who at times were relatives and mediators of the workers. For example, Rezene was targeted for his strictness, and the girls would chant: “Rather than having Rezene as supervisor, I prefer to pick tomatoes” and “Rather than having Rezene as supervisor, I prefer sitting at home.”<sup>82</sup>

In contrast to these individuals who generated fear and tension, women cited other men, Italians and non-Italians, who “were very good” and “very very good,” though their kindness and permissiveness was hardly appreciated by the company management, which preferred a harsh, paternalistic demeanor,<sup>83</sup> as demonstrated by the establishment of a school for the children of female workers, in conjunction with the company’s 1965 expansion, or the distribution of bicycles and mopeds to skilled workers. Likewise, the local press reported sporting and leisure initiatives that involved approximately 12,000 workers employed in Barattolo’s twenty years of activity. Further, on holidays, such as ሙስቀል (*meskel*),<sup>84</sup> the management would ask the workers to arrive in formal dress and to participate in celebrations where souvenir photos were taken in a convivial atmosphere (see Figure 5).

However, the better economic treatment reserved for skilled labor did not seem sufficient to mitigate the turnover of these workers, whose skills





**FIGURE 5.** አንዳ ባራቶሎ—1960 GC አሥጦራ። [Inda Barattolo—1960 GC Asmära]. Source: © Aster.

enabled them to take advantage of what the market had to offer. Once again chants and slogans were the vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction and desire to move on to where working and living conditions seemed better. Many conversations and work songs feature the desire to relocate to Addis Ababa,<sup>85</sup> as suggested in the lyrics: “Rather than staying here, I start walking because all roads go to Addis Ababa.”<sup>86</sup>

During the 1960s, Ḥaylä Šəllase held campaigns calling for all high school students and skilled workers to migrate to Ethiopia. Advertisements on the radio and in newspapers targeting the young provided opportunities in Ethiopia. Such campaigns might have been part and parcel of the collective imagination. Skilled workers, both men and women, who arrived between 1957 and 1975 in Ethiopia succeeded in securing jobs in road construction and transportation service, in the food and textile manufacturing industries, as well as in garages, because they had already acquired skills, so they played an important role in modernizing Ethiopia. Thus, labor stories are also stories of mobility, because the working-class population showed a good degree of dynamism, between opportunities in Eritrea’s urban areas, Ethiopia, and

beyond. For example, Bisrat, born on the outskirts of Asmāra in 1951, worked at Barattolo until she came of age, and in 1973 she migrated to escape her abusive husband, leaving a young son in Eritrea. She found work in Italy as a domestic worker and immediately volunteered to raise funds for the liberation front. Five years later she married an Italo-Eritrean, with whom she had a second child.<sup>87</sup> Aster left the factory after four years, and found a better job at an oil mill in Asmāra. But not yet of age and falsifying her date of birth, she left for Italy as a domestic worker, thanks to the intermediation of Agenzia Maria, which for years facilitated the movement of Eritrean girls to find work in Italy.<sup>88</sup> Empirical evidence indicates that the factory experience, which sometimes coincided with transitional phases in their personal lives, exposed generations of women to “different ways of being and doing” by raising their awareness and paving the way for new ambitions,<sup>89</sup> despite its inability to undermine totally the gender roles of Tegreñña society or to promote real gender equality.

Most scholars who work on labor resistance agree that the prevalent analytical approach involves politicization and strikes.<sup>90</sup> Although during Italian colonial rule Eritrean workers were prohibited by law from unionizing, isolated protests against the foregoing injustices occurred all over Eritrea and led to detention and exile. Under the British Administration, workers could organize into unions. The first trade union was established in 1948, and it was factory-based. In the early-1950s, the newly elected National Assembly approved the Eritrean Constitution, which protected the right of workers to form trade unions, and so the Syndicate of Free Eritrean Workers was founded on the principle of unity among all Eritrean workers and endowed with its own newsletter (*Voice of Eritrea*). In 1953, the workers staged a number of strikes in pursuit of better working conditions and benefits such as paid annual leave and pensions, but the Unionist Party that was in power turned against the Syndicate and its leaders, and closed its office, so activities had to continue underground. Hence, Roberto Barattolo had to start up his textile business in a phase of turmoil, in which Eritrean workers demonstrated for an increase in unemployment and demanding better working conditions. In 1958, the union called a three-day strike that paralyzed Asmāra and Massawa: people, students, teachers, the young, and women took part in the three-day general strike, but the government

responded by killing 9 and wounding 500. Because of the violence with which the strike was repressed, it is described as the “first blood” spilled for the Eritrean revolution.<sup>91</sup>

Following the annexation of Eritrea, strikes and sabotage resumed, provoking a severe response from the government. This attitude prompted a number of workers to leave the city and join the guerrillas in the mountains, whereas other workers emigrated to the Middle East or other regions of Africa, meanwhile continuing to contribute to the nationalist cause. Women played a crucial role in this situation, compensating for the lack of male labor and taking on new responsibilities in the family and the workplace, as well as in the nationalist claim. In this situation, they too found themselves on the front line, not only by choosing to join the liberation fronts, but in the clandestine activities carried out in the areas and factories under Ethiopian rule, such as Asmära and Barattolo. Between 1970 and 1974, workers again managed to organize clandestinely to transmit information and material aid to the EPLF.

With the advent of the Derg regime, Roberto Barattolo found himself managing a heated situation in the months preceding the factory’s nationalization, with work and political tensions overlapping. Worker opposition was widespread within the factory and the discontent took the form of small acts of sabotage and debates among workers, despite the fear of “in-factory” spies. On September 24, 1974, workers at Barattolo went on strike. According to the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Union officer, it started with employees who sent a petition to the Derg for better wage and benefit conditions.<sup>92</sup> Barattolo refused to grant any of the strikers’ demands and the workers expected the Derg’s support, so Roberto Barattolo threatened to close down his factory or hire new workers from the swelling ranks of Asmära’s unemployed. The Derg found itself in the difficult position of trying to satisfy the competing claims of an important foreign employer and dissatisfied Ethiopian laborers. Furthermore, during a tour in ‘Aligädär the employer told the U.S. Consul General that in a discussion with the Derg he had contrasted thousands of Eritreans permitted to work in Italy with a small number of expatriates employed in Eritrea. The implication was that the Italian government could retaliate if its nationals were discriminated against in the name of “Ethiopization.”<sup>93</sup> On October 6, 1974, the *Quotidiano Eritreo*

reported that a salary increase would have been granted in accordance with a collective bargaining agreement, while other demands would have been negotiated by a committee made up of workers, management, the Department of Community Development and the Derg, which ordered all workers to return to work on the afternoon of October 7, 1974, or risk dismissal.<sup>94</sup> Less than a year later, in 1975, Barattolo, then the third largest company in sub-Saharan Africa, was nationalized and its “commanding heights” passed into the hands of the state-owned National Textile Corporation through a centrally planned economy that deliberately halted further industrial development of Eritrea.

Since the 1970s, the EPLF has relied heavily on female workers as support personnel. Some women who worked at Barattolo were mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of the ትጋደልቲ (*tegadelti*, freedom fighters) who were fighting for independence. From the early stages of the liberation struggle, the factory ended up representing both the only source of income for families whose male members had joined the liberation fronts, and a place of resistance and sharing of information and practices aimed at undermining Ethiopian control.<sup>95</sup> Some villagers who worked at Barattolo passed on information to the *tegadelti* hiding in the mountains. They even pilfered fabrics or other materials that could be useful by getting them past the checks they were subjected to at the end of each shift. The factory was also a place where private correspondence to and from the ጠቅላይ (*mieda*, battlefield) was sorted.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, tension in and around the factory grew as workers from rural areas began renting shared housing in the expanding neighborhoods of Godayf and Kahawta, where the Ethiopian troops were also stationed, some of whom had relationships and children with female workers at Barattolo, now called the Asmara Textile Factory.<sup>97</sup> This situation undermined the solidarity reported by female workers of the 1950s and 1960s. By the late 1970s, during the years of the Red Terror,<sup>98</sup> “warehouses were destroyed to house the [Ethiopian] soldiers. . . . The machine motors were removed and the spinning mill disassembled.”<sup>99</sup>

The testimonies report clandestine activities throughout the factory until independence was achieved in 1991. The label “secessionist” with which the Ethiopian authorities classified the workers of the textile company

recognizes the commitment of the female workers in the liberation struggle and the political awareness that developed through wage labor.

## Conclusion

The demand for cheap labor, highly gender-segregated industrial sectors, sociopolitical transformations, together with the possibility of new professional trajectories no longer linked to the previous colonial state, jointly favored the feminization of the workforce in Eritrean light industry from the 1950s to the 1970s. Asmāra, being the main city in Eritrea, continued to be a pole of attraction for internal and regional labor mobility, especially for women, becoming—especially through wage workers—a space for negotiating gender roles, labor relations and political expression.

With the Barattolo case study I have attempted to place the Eritrean textile industry workers within the history of female work in Africa by combining the gender dimension with industrial dynamics in a urban setting, where European investors generated jobs while workers played an important political role within an anti-colonial resistance to an African power. By providing more detail, archival documents, life histories, and the multivocal approach helped me understand when, how, and why the textile industry influenced the urban and social infrastructure of Asmāra, with regard to the joint transformation of the city and the role of female wage workers. In fact, the recruitment system, the deployment of the female workforce, and skills acquisition within the manufacturing industry expanded their ability to compete and negotiate, as well as their spatial and social mobility, also translating into greater awareness. Finally, the working experience became a reason and a means of resistance—on a different scale—that occurred within and beyond the factoryscape.

What emerges from work and personal trajectories is that wage employment in the factory was temporary, often a transitory or necessary phase towards other forms of personal and professional fulfillment, which often involved long-range mobility and socioeconomic improvements. From the individual stories of Eden, Gidey, and “the others of Barattolo” a collective narrative has emerged describing how the entry of large groups of women into the wage labor market, and though it did not enable them to gain greater

financial independence, it did allow them to challenge gender roles and invent different forms of resistance, so Barattolo became a “fabric of identity” of female wage workers and Eritrean citizens.

On entering the factory, generally aided by male mediators belonging to their circle of family and friends, the girls gained new skills through on-the-job training, to the point of becoming, physically and mentally, full-fledged technical workers. The case study provides an insight into the way in which Eritrean women from the second half of the twentieth century acquired a formidable skills set that enabled them to work in a new environment and to develop an attitude that was both affected by their social conditions and in turn affected those conditions and their relations within and beyond the factory. However, the new responsibilities that extra-domestic work entailed and the economic contribution that these female workers brought to their households were insufficient to guarantee a neutral or positive perception of female labor in the factory, because, in deviating from the female model promoted by the patriarchal society of the Eritrean plateau, they were stigmatized and considered morally suspect. Nonetheless, “those bad Barattolo girls” were able to cope through forms of daily resistance with the many obstacles and oppressions that they encountered and that tempered them for more organized struggles, clandestine and not, which transcended the sole purpose of demonstrating for better working conditions, up to including their participation in the nationalist cause.

All these elements make it possible to highlight how Asmāra, the city *of* women, between the 1950s and the 1970s was not yet fully a city *for* women, but that through the erosion of traditional male purviews, such as the extra-domestic work of wage earners, their role in society was changing.

## Notes

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11. Agency for International Development, Terminal Report of the Development Loan Fund. August 1957—November 3, 1961 (typewritten document, 1962), 22. The expansion of the company and the purchase of new machinery from the Marzoli Company in Palazzolo sull'Oglio (Bergamo) also led to the hiring and arrival of at least seven families of Italian technicians, for whom specific accommodations were provided.
  12. Betwoded Asfaha Wolde Michael, vice-representative of the emperor in Eritrea since 1953 and later chief executive in Eritrea since August 1955, obtained ETH \$50,000 to purchase seventy-one shares of Barattolo. Even Asrate Kassa, viceroys of Eritrea (1964–70) and a member of the nobility of the Ethiopian Empire, was rewarded with large overdrafts of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian dollars that he used to purchase buildings, stocks, and shares from Italian companies, including SAIDE. See Luca Puddu, "A Contested Financial Frontier," 859–61.
  13. Imperial Ethiopian Government, Investment Decree 51/1963.
  14. Social and Economic Development of Eritrea since 1962 (typewritten document, Rome, Italy, 1966).
  15. *Sestante. Documentario Semestrale Illustrato di Vita Politica Economica Sociale dell'Etiopia* 4, no. 2 (1968): 69.
  16. The SIA was established through the takeover of a government company in the early 1930s. Designed mainly to cotton production, which was suspended during the British Administration, it was restored in 1948. At the end of the 1950s, the company employed about 2,000 indigenous people and fifteen Italian technicians. These numbers grew significantly when Barattolo purchased the company in the mid-1960s, reaching 10,000 units. During the early armed struggle Barattolo paid protection money to the ELF, sparing 'Aligədər from attack. By 1967, when the imperial government launched the first counterinsurgency campaign, the ELF was making transportation in the lowlands almost impossible and forced industrialists to bribe them to avoid attacks. See Killion, "The Eritrean Economy in Historical Perspective," 108; Tom Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 149.
  17. The nationalization measures included the formal promise of refund, with the exception of urban land and housing. Harrison C. Dunning, "Rural Land

Reform in Socialist Ethiopia: The First Year,” *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee* 10, no. 2 (1977): 203–13. The Refund Commission was supposed to collect the documented claims of those affected by the nationalization and negotiate the compensation arrangements. The Commission, however, once it had gathered the documents, did not proceed with the liquidation. Although the Italians affected by the nationalization had formed a committee to assert their rights, the issue was resolved only in 1982 through the Palleschi Agreement, which relieved Ethiopia from any obligation to compensate, because Italy assumed the burden of compensation. Full text: <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/267552.pdf>.

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20. Phyllis Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons* (1952; repr. New York: Routledge, 2004).
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22. Barbara Potthast-Jutkeit, “The History of Family and Colonialism: Examples from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean,” *History of the Family* 2, no. 2 (1997): 115–21; Alber Erdmute, Tabea Häberlein, and Jeannett Martin, “Changing Webs of Kinship: Spotlights on West Africa,” *Africa Spectrum* 45, no. 3 (2010): 43–67.
23. For inspiring insights on the use of oral history for the reconstruction of individual and collective labor histories, see Luisa Passerini, *Torino operaia e fascismo. Una storia orale* (Roma-Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1984); Jan M. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985);

- Maurice Halbwachs, *I quadri sociali della memoria* (Naples, Italy: Ipermedium Libri, 1997); Sandra E. Greene, "Whispers and Silences: Explorations in African Oral History," *Africa Today* 50, no. 2 (2003): 41–53; Nicoué T. Gayibor, Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton, and Moustapha Gomgnimbou, eds., *L'écriture de l'histoire en Afrique. L'oralité toujours en question* (Paris: Karthala, 2013); Gregor Feindt et al., "Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 53, no. 1 (2014): 24–44.
24. Martin A. Klein, "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery," *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 209–17.
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88. Agenzia Maria was established by former missionaries in the 1940s. It was based in Piazza della Posta 29, in Asmāra. In addition to handling paperwork, copy and translations, it was well renowned for its ability to employ young Eritrean women as domestic workers in Italian families in Eritrea but above all in Italy facilitating labor mobility.
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**Valentina Fusari** is researcher in history of Africa in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Turin. She holds a PhD in geopolitics (University of Pisa). She has been assistant professor at the Adi Keih College of Arts and Social Sciences (Eritrea) and postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pavia (Italy). Valentina has conducted long-term archival and fieldwork research in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Her research interests concern gendered labor history, mixedness, and social mobility in the Horn of Africa.

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