

## Abstract

*From the midwife to the obstetrician. From the craft to the profession? The maternity houses in Naples between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

The focus of this study is the transition from the craft of midwife to the one of obstetrician in Naples between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the aftermath of WW1. The history of midwifery, fairly disregarded by Italian historiography, results crucial in order to fully understand both the role of women and of the foundation of the family in post-unification Italy. It firmly highlights the complexity, the undertones and, sometimes, the contradictions of the female models.

The historical research, mainly in the English area, has fully recognized the indisputable significance of the midwives' role. As a matter of fact, they emerge as representatives of medical professions in the volume by Willem Tousijn, *Il sistema delle occupazioni sanitarie* (2000), which combines both historical reconstruction and sociological survey. On the contrary, midwifery is not mentioned in the works of Angelo Varni and Maria Malatesta about the history of the professions in Europe and Italy. If, on the one hand, the history of midwifery is quite acquainted for the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, thanks to the works by Mireill Laget, *Naissances: l'accouchement avant l'âge de la clinique* (1982), and by Jacques Gélis, *La sage-femme ou le médecin* (1988), on the other hand, however, the 19<sup>th</sup> century still remains to be written for the great part. In Italy, Claudia Pancino and Alessandra Gissi have traced an outline of the midwives' path for their professional achievement throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Starting from this background, this research has focused on the Neapolitan context in the post-unification Italy, mainly absent in the historical reconstructions. This study has also disclosed the dynamics and the conflicts which characterized the midwives in their shift from *mammane* to obstetricians. The main difficulty in Naples is represented by the scarceness of available sources, because most of the documents got lost in the fire of the Incurabili archive. Such documents could have been important, because the midwifery school of Naples rose in 1812 in the Hospital of the Incurabili. Hence, the analysis focused on the archival series of the *Appuntamenti* and of the *Deliberazioni* of the Real Casa Santa dell'Annunziata, where the maternity house ("Casa di maternità") was established in 1888. The material was very interesting, because it constituted a firsthand source, which had never been consulted. The Annunziata, as a matter of fact, throughout the years has been the focus of

numerous studies which, however, concentrated on other topics. The majority mainly reconstructed the historical aspects of such a religious site, or focused on the question of the foundlings and the activities of the foundling hospital. Heretofore any specific study has concentrated on the maternity house of the Annunziata and on its activity between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The current research provides an interesting overview of the delay of the changes in the medical field occurred in Naples. The midwives' personal files allowed to reconstruct a cross-section of history not only about midwifery, but about social history of great interest. It has been possible to reconstruct the main points of the change which allowed the midwife shift from the ancient craft to the medical and professional dimension, with particular reference to the conflict between the experiential and the scientific knowledge. It emerges a complex and controversial image of the midwife, characterized by the coexistence of a variety of old features and stratifications and new professional acquisitions. Despite the midwives absence in some texts about the history of medical professions, this analysis on the midwives world starts from the examination of female professions.

Until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the professional world was exclusively male, and the only possibility for women was represented by midwifery and gynaecology. This situation paradoxically reversed during 1800. Midwifery ceased to be a merely female activity, and became worthwhile for the medical context. During the years before unification, midwifery becomes a source of significant struggles. Despite the medics attempts at undermining and discrediting them, midwives will choose the profession. They will accept to be educated by the male medical science, but they will preserve their knowledge and experience heritage bequeathed by the traditional female science.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Europe and in the rest of Italy, the relationship between medics and midwives faces a new era which leads to the mutual collaboration and the achievement of results. On the contrary, in Naples, the shift from the craft to the profession is very slow and characterized by the midwives' limited willingness to lose the complexity and richness peculiar to their activity which the new medical science is trying to eradicate. Their position results ambiguous; on the one hand they strive for their inclusion in the medical context and for the acknowledgement of their technical expertise . On the other hand, however, they are not available to lose their economical and social privileges. As for the medical world, the removal of both the traditional knowledge and the midwives'

social role among the women and the communities, shows a limited open-mindedness.

The analysis ends in the 1930s, when the professional path of Neapolitan midwives converges, despite a consistent delay, in a consolidated European and Italian professional context. The situation will change only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the Neapolitan midwives involvement in the establishment of corporative associations for the rights safeguard of their profession and for the organization of general meetings. The struggle will be towards the recognition of the midwife's role and the acknowledgment of this craft as a profession. Journals and magazines will be established in order to reach this goal. As a matter of fact, even if they accepted their position in the medical and in the sanitary official contexts, the Neapolitan midwives used such journals and magazines as an instrument for their struggle for professional achievement.