ARE THERE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FIRST EMPLOYMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS WITH AND WITHOUT MIGRATION BACKGROUND IN ITALY[1]

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Abstract. Youths with migration background in Italy are progressively growing up and consequently entering the labour market, a transition that has recently gained scholarly attention. This study focuses on their initial work experiences, thereby deepening the critical transition from school to work, which is pivotal in their journey to adulthood and crucial for their socio-economic integration into Italian society.

Drawing on data from the 2021 Italian Labour Force Survey ad hoc module, we explore occupational paths of young adults aged 25-34. Adopting a comparative perspective, we differentiate between Italian natives and young adults with a migration background, categorized by their age at arrival. Through discrete-time event history analysis, we reconstruct the median age at which different groups first enter into the labour market. Using logistic regression models, we examine how several determinants such as educational level, parents' educational level, migration background, and place of residence shape the timing of this event.

This research sheds light on the employment paths of immigrant youths, revealing distinct timing for groups with diverse migration backgrounds and educational experiences. A significant finding is the notable disparities in the timing of labour market entry among women across all studied categories, with women entering the labour market at an older age and having significantly lower employment rates compared to men. Additionally, the study confirms that male young immigrants who arrived in Italy during or after school age tend to enter the labour market earlier.

1. Introduction

Young people with migration background represent an important and dynamic component of the Italian population. They are progressively increasing due to the stabilization of immigration processes in Italy, in addition they are growing and facing the transition to adulthood (Buonomo *et al.*, 2023). This demographic shift presents a major challenge for Italian society in ensuring occupational integration and equal opportunities.

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Access to employment and working conditions for immigrants' descendants have only been explored recently due to Italy's relatively young history as a destination for international immigration and the resulting young age of immigrants' children (Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022). Recent studies have highlighted persistent barriers to social mobility and the reproduction of inequality structures among immigrants' descendants (Buonomo *et al.*, 2023; Piccitto, 2023). Building on prior research, our study investigates the labour market entry of young adults with a migration background, with a specific focus on their initial work experiences. The goal is to shed light on the school to work transition, by specifically identifying the timing at which this event occurs for different categories of young adults, comparing natives and residents with migration background. This approach is relevant because it can serve as an indicator of the socio-economic integration of young adults and because a life event has cumulative effects on subsequent trajectories (Elder, 1985).

We aim to address the following research question: "Does the timing of labour market entry vary across different generations of migrants and by gender?". Using data from the 2021 Italian Labour Force Survey ad hoc module, the analysis primarily focuses on young adults aged between 25 and 34 years.

Previous studies indicate significant differences in educational and labour market outcomes among various migratory generations (Rumbaut, 2004). Individuals born in Italy or arriving in early childhood tend to align more closely with native Italians, displaying higher educational investment (D'Ambrosio and di Padova, 2023) and a reluctance to pursue low-skilled jobs (Piccitto, 2023). Conversely, immigrants arriving during school-age or adolescence face higher dropout risks and are more likely to work in low-skilled positions (Buonomo *et al.*, 2023). In addition, young women exhibit lower employment rates compared to men (Vianello and Toffanin, 2021). Based on these observations, we formulate two research hypotheses: 1. Youths with a migration background enter in the labour market earlier than Italian; 2. Women enter the labour market later than men.

2. Theoretical Background

According to the life course theory, the transition from school to work is one of the main milestones that constitute the transition to adulthood (Elder, 1985). In highly developed countries, compared to patterns observed several decades ago, the normative timing for this transition has been extended. The time dedicated to education has been extended because many young people continue their studies at the university level, delaying leaving the parental home, entering full-time employment, and making decisions about marriage and children (Spanò, 2019). Research shows that young people with a migration background do not necessarily follow the transition timelines of the

non-immigrant majority. Timelines vary not only between different generations but also among different ethnic groups (Ferrari and Pailhé, 2017).

The timing of entry into the labour market is important because it often coincides with the end of schooling and it is the first step toward independence. According to human capital theory, investment in education is fundamental for career success, as the knowledge and skills acquired through education increase individuals' economic productivity and job opportunities, allowing them to access more qualified and better-paid jobs (Becker, 1962). Conversely, early entry into the labour market is a cause for concern if associated with early school leaving, as it can reproduce inequalities and indicate paths of downward assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993).

Various factors influence the timing of labour market entry, and young people with migration background often face cumulative disadvantages (Gonzales and Roth, 2015). A first aspect concerns the family context. Indeed, the children of immigrants often come from families that occupy disadvantaged positions in the host society. In Italy, for example, it is well known that first-generation immigrants are frequently employed in unskilled and poorly paid jobs (Simionescu, 2021). The economic resources and educational levels of parents significantly impact their children's educational trajectories and their ability to invest in human capital, ultimately leading to better employment outcomes (Lee *et al*., 2024). A second aspect concerns the obstacles that youths with a migration background face in the school system (Birkelund, 2019). According to OECD publications on PISA results (2019), in Italy students with a migration background achieve, on average, lower academic and learning outcomes compared to their native peers (Triventi *et al*., 2022) and face significantly higher risks of educational delays and dropout (Buonomo *et al*., 2018). They are also more likely to enrol in technical and vocational educational tracks and, consequently, are less likely to continue with tertiary education (Azzolini *et al*., 2019). However, the timing of entering the labour market may not be entirely attributable to socio-economic background factors or the acquired human capital. In fact, according to the theory of ethnic penalty, those who belong to ethnic minorities face a persistent disadvantage in the labour market, resulting in higher risks of unemployment and greater difficulty in reaching professional or managerial positions, regardless of the qualifications acquired and other individual characteristics (Brinbaum, 2018). Several studies focusing the position of immigrants' descendants in the labour market compared with native peers, indicate that young with migration background are disadvantages in the European countries: they are disproportionately unemployed; work in precarious jobs; experience longer waiting times before obtaining their first job and are often overqualified for their jobs (Bucca and Drouhot, 2024; Han and Hermansen, 2024).

In Italy, the initial studies on the labour market entry of children of immigrants have identified downward assimilation paths, leading to higher risks of unemployment, particularly for women, or concentration in low-skilled jobs (Vianello and Toffanin,

2021). Specifically, when the group of descendants is broken down by migratory generation, as proposed by Rumbaut (2004), significant differences emerge: the 1.5 and 1.25 generations generally tend to exhibit behaviour similar to that of first-generation immigrants in terms of work strategies and aspirations, with higher employment probabilities but penalized in terms of job quality (Piccitto, 2023). Second-generation individuals, on the other hand, have lower employment probabilities, which can be explained by their younger age, greater investment in education, and unwillingness to occupy positions in the less qualified areas of the labour market (Buonomo *et al.*, 2023).

Another factor to consider is gender. Studies on youths with a migration background indicate that girls achieve better academic results compared to boys of the same ethnicity, successfully completing higher education cycles, including tertiary education, more often than their male peers (Bozzetti, 2021). This influences the timing of their entry into the labour market. However, better academic results do not generally translate into better employment outcomes (Gambaro *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, some studies indicate an 'educational segregation' that disadvantages them toward professional qualifications related to caregiving or part-time work (Østbakken, 2023).

3. Data & Method

The dataset used, Italian Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2021 ad hoc module from ISTAT, comprises 127,097 observations. Our analysis considered only 9,502 observations, only individuals aged between 25 and 34 were selected, divided into four distinct groups: Italian Natives are 83.64% of the sample, Migrants who arrived at preschool age (i.e., the second generation of migrants with at least one foreign parent and migrants who arrived in Italy up to the age of 6) constitute 4.02%, Migrants who arrived at school age (arrived between the ages of 6 and 17) account for 2.58%, and Migrants who arrived at post-school age (arrived after the age of 18) represent 9.77%. An additional selection was made for immigrants, opting only for those from Less Developed and Central-Eastern Europe Countries. The choice of different immigrant groups was based on the time spent in Italy and in schools, assuming that a longer period in Italy favours greater integration and results similar to Italian peers. Despite the 2021 module ad hoc for migrants, we have data exclusively on regular residents. The ten-year range allows us to specifically observe individuals who have completed their studies and have entered or are entering into the labour market. An event history analysis was applied, using the available question from the questionnaire that indicates the year of starting the first job and setting the time and individuals exposed to the risk of their first work experience from the age of 14 up to 34. Since we only have the year (or age) of the first job, the analysis was conducted in discrete time. This approach allowed us to prepare the dataset for regression, creating several records for each ID for each age exposed to

risk. The replicated records remain for each ID until the age at which the event occurs or the survey end year, 2021. We construct a life table obtaining the survival function at the event and we calculate the exact median age at first employment for all four groups. Subsequently, a logistic model was applied where the response variable is the event: 0 was assigned to those who have not found their first job, and 1 to those who have found their first job, with 61.57% of the sample having experienced the event of finding their first job.

$$log\left[\frac{p_{ti}}{1 - p_{ti}}\right] = \alpha D_{ti} + \beta X_{ti}$$

The probability of the event during interval *t* for each individual *i* is p_{ti} and the logarithm of the odds of the event at time *t* relative to survival beyond time *t* is calculated. We define D_{ti} as a vector of functions representing the cumulative duration for interval *t*, with coefficients α, which outline the baseline hazard. X_{ti} is a vector of covariates (time constant) with coefficients β. We depicted the baseline hazard functions of people at risk, differentiating by gender. Additionally, we specified the baseline hazards as a series of dummy variables in a piecewise constant exponential model. The variables considered in the model are: the categorical variable of individuals' and parents' education, aggregated into the same education level categories following the criteria of the International Standard Classification on Education (ISCED-97). Specifically, the levels were aggregated into Primary and no-education (ref.), Lower secondary, Upper secondary, Tertiary. For parents, the highest educational level (between mother and father) was considered, resulting in a single variable representing the highest educational level. As additional descriptive information about individuals, we also considered the place of residence, divided into macro-regions: North (ref.), Centre, and South. Finally, we evaluated the influence of a scholar internship on obtaining the first job, using the category of not having done an internship as the reference, compared to having done a paid or unpaid internship.

4. Results

The age and gender pyramids (Fig.1) of the sample show how the different identified groups are distributed by age, highlighting a gender balance in each group but a structural difference in percentage terms in the composition of the sample. For the Italian Natives, there is a balanced age distribution, while the structure for migrants who arrived at preschool age and those who arrived at post-school age is completely opposite, creating an image of an overlapping funnel. This confirms the trend in Italy of seeing second-

generation and migrants arrived in early age concentrated more in the younger age groups.

Figure 1 – *Age and Gender Pyramid of Selected Groups from the Sample in the 25-34 Age Bracket.*
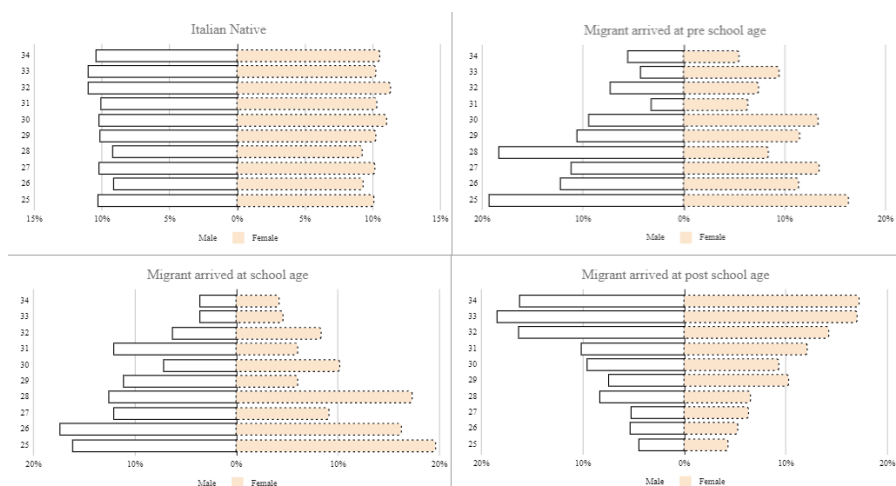
Source: our elaborations on LFS 2021 data

In addition to the difference in sample size between natives and immigrants, we observe that by setting the start of the observation period for the first job from ages 14 to 34, using the life table, we calculated the exact age of first employment using the survival function (Tab. 1).

The curves obtained (not showed in the article but available on request) are very similar, but when observing the exact age, there is no significant difference in the median age of 25 years. However, migrants who arrived at post-school age deviate significantly, reaching their first job at 29 years. This result allowed us to better analyse the phenomenon, noting that the results vary when differentiated by gender. The new analysis shows that in all groups, men enter into the labour market earlier (about 3 years) than women. For male migrants who arrived at post-school age, the median age at first job is in line with and slightly lower (22.77 years) than other groups, while women in this same group the survival function do not reach the median age (first quartile median age available on request).

Table 1 − *Obtained values of the survival function for the event of finding the first job for the different identified groups and separated by gender at the median age. Residents aged 25-34 years living in Italy, 2021.*

Groups		Survival Values	Std. Error	Median Age
Italian native	All sample	0,489	0,0056	24,78
	Male	0,478	0,0079	23,48
	Female	0,470	0,0082	26,18
Migrant arrived at Pre-school age	All sample	0,468	0,0262	25,18
	Male	0,485	0,0376	22,64
	Female	0,490	0,0372	26,15
Migrant arrived at School age	All sample	0,494	0,0322	24,86
	Male	0,500	0,0472	22,00
	Female	0,489	0,0457	27,21
Migrant arrived after School age	All sample	0,491	0,0171	29,14
	Male	0,482	0,0472	21,77
	Female	/	/	/

Source: our elaborations on LFS 2021 data.
Note: The survival function of women does not reach the median age.

The model (Tab.2) reveals a significant gender difference, confirmed both in the calculation of the median age and in the representation of the hazard function. Women have a lower probability of obtaining their first job compared to men. Additionally, regarding birth cohorts divided into five-year periods, we see that the cohort born between 1987 and 1991 has a higher probability of getting a job. For the region of residence, the South and Centre are disadvantaged compared to Northern Italy. The model also highlights the disadvantage that the group of immigrants who arrived in Italy after the age of 18 faces compared to natives in finding their first job. One explanation is that the group of 25–34 year-olds who arrived in Italy as adults between 2006 and 2020 mostly came in the last decade, a period marked by a decline in work-related immigration and an increase in family reunifications and refugees. This disadvantage, is also observed for the group of immigrants who arrived at school age, showing how probably late arrival in Italy puts immigrants at a disadvantage compared to natives, even though this group has completed at least compulsory schooling in Italy. Furthermore, just as parental education, individuals' level of education also influences the probability of finding a job: higher educational qualifications are associated with greater chances of being employed, but with a lower probability for peers of parents with tertiary education, likely due to the small sample size of this category. Finally, it is noted that having had the opportunity to do an internship positively affects getting a job, particularly a paid internship experience significantly increases this probability.

Table 2 − *Logistic Model Values Obtained Through Event History Analysis for the Event of Finding a First Job in the 25-34 Age Group in Italy, 2021.*

Ref. Variables	Mod.Variables	Odds ratio	Std. err.	Z	P>z
Men	Women	0,596	0,017	-18.48	0.000***
Cohort 1992-1996	Cohort 1987-1991	1,177	0,034	5.72	0.000***
North	Centre	0,723	0,027	-8.83	0.000***
	South & Islands	0,385	0,013	-28.56	0.000***
Native Italian	Migrant arrived at Pre-school age	0,876	0,063	-1.85	
	Migrant arrived at School age	0,792	0,072	-2.56	0.010**
	Migrant arrived after School age	0,604	0,033	-9.16	0.000***
Parents Education No Title-Primary	Lower secondary	1,107	0,057	1.96	
	Upper secondary	0,973	0,053	-0.51	
	Tertiary	0,763	0,049	-4.24	0.000***
Education No Title-Primary	Lower secondary	1,619	0,244	3.19	0.001***
	Upper secondary	2,086	0,312	4.91	0.000***
	Tertiary	1,885	0,286	4.18	0.000***
No Internship	yes, paid	1,314	0,091	3.96	0.000***
	yes, unpaid	1,118	0,047	4.13	0.000***
	Constant	0,007	0,001	26.18	0.000***

Note: Number of obs = 109,909; LR chi2(23) = 3285.80; Prob > chi2 = 0.0000; Pseudo R2 = 0.0720.
*Statistical significance of the relationship is marked by * if p<0.1, ** if p<0.05, *** if p<0.01. Source: our elaborations on LFS data, ad hoc module 2021.*

The hazard graph (Fig.2) represents the results obtained from the model. We can trace the age with the highest risks of finding a job. Starting from 14 years old, the curve continuously increases until it reaches two peaks: one between 18 and 21 years old, and another between 24 and 30. From 30 years old onwards, the risk of the event decreases drastically. Referring to the model's baseline, it is noted that the curves of women are lower, indicating that, compared to the baseline, women have a lower risk of finding their first job. In particular, women who arrived at post-school age are more disadvantaged: they have a lower risk of finding a job, despite being more educated than men.

Figure 2 – *The Hazard Function Obtained from the Model for Age at Risk for Female of the sample divided by groups.*
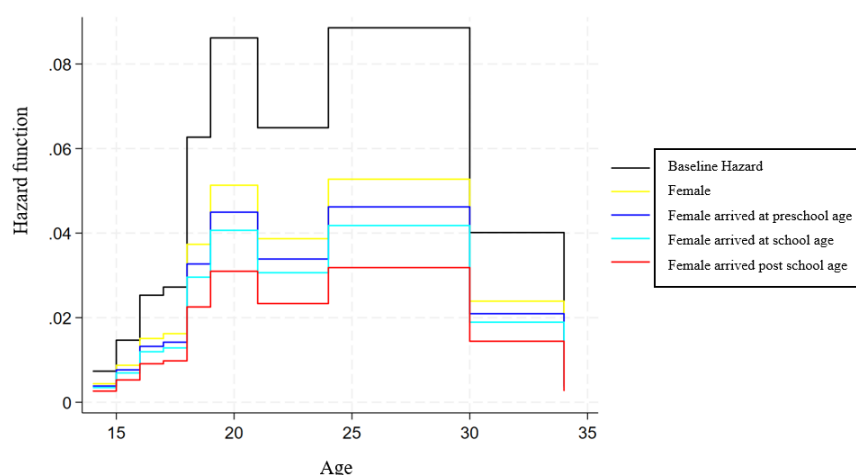
Source: our elaborations on LFS 2021 data

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In our analysis, interesting results have emerged that suggest avenues for future investigations. The age difference at first employment among the identified groups provides insights into the transition to adulthood, with a slight advancement observed among immigrants who arrived after school age. The first hypothesis, stating that youths with a migration background enter the labour market earlier than Italian natives, is not confirmed when considering migration generation alone, but significant differences emerge when divided by gender. The results show that the older male immigrants are when they arrive in Italy, the younger they tend to start working. The second hypothesis is confirmed across all observed groups; indeed, the results show that women enter the labour market later than men, highlighting pronounced gender differences in the age of workforce entry. Our data show that women, despite having higher educational qualifications, are disadvantaged in terms of the age at which they enter the workforce, confirming the literature (Farris and de Jong, 2014). These findings fit into a broader framework, highlighting specific characteristics of the Italian context. The workforce transition of immigrant men arriving in Italy at an older age appears to reflect immediate economic pressures or a need for rapid adaptation, phenomena already documented in other European studies (Heath *et al*., 2008). Compared to other countries, the Italian

context is distinct due to a labour market characterized by segmentation and structural barriers that affect migrants' ability to integrate into the workforce.

A problem with our analysis lies in the scarcity of information contained in the dataset; in fact, the question examined about the date of the first job start does not include a clear definition of it. Consequently, this could include seasonal, unstable jobs or other types of employment. Additionally, we do not have data on the economic condition, neither past nor present, which could indicate the entry point into the workforce. Another limitation is the issue of difference in sample size, which for the selected groups and age class chosen varies significantly. This scarcity highlighted the trend in Italy of these groups, which are more numerous in younger age groups.

Our goal is to obtain additional data to expand future analysis, with particular attention to the gender issue. It will be useful to further investigate the gender issue, considering the influence of ethnicity, culture, and religiosity, maternity as well as the impact of educational qualifications on women's trajectories. Despite its limitations, this study provides an initial contribution to better understanding the labour market integration pathways of young migrants in Italy, offering valuable insights for future interventions and the development of more targeted policies aimed at reducing inequalities.

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