

HOW THE FOREIGNERS' OCCUPATIONS IN ITALY ARE EVOLVING: AN ANALYSIS ACROSS GENERATIONS AND GENDERS¹

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Abstract. In 2024, the number of employed persons with foreign citizenship returned to growth, after the previous year's stability, reaching about 2.5 million, 10.5% of total employment. Foreign employment has always been characterised by higher employment rates than the Italian component, but this advantage has gradually decreased over the last ten years, particularly since the pandemic: while in 2014 the employment rate of foreigners aged 15–64 exceeded that of Italians by about 3 percentage points, in 2024 the two rates were almost identical (62.3% vs. 62.2%).

Several studies show that in Italy the advantage of foreign citizens in employment is linked to their ability to intercept a labour demand with characteristics of greater flexibility, lower qualification and lower remuneration. Moreover, migratory networks contribute to feeding the concentration of employment in certain sectors, through replicated schemes of information dissemination, knowledge and support between relatives and co-nationals. For these reasons, the dynamics of the labour market by citizenship is particularly linked to the sectors of economic activity in which foreigners are most employed, to the sectoral skills of the different communities, as well as to the different composition by gender found within them.

This study aims to analyse whether the approximation in employment rates between foreigners and natives between 2014 and 2024 corresponds to a change in the occupational structure of employment, despite the fact that the foreign labour market is still strongly segregated. Using data from the Labour Force Survey conducted by Istat, the analysis will identify changes in foreign presence in specific occupational groups, taking into account gender, country of citizenship and age also through a multidimensional analysis.

1. The labour market of foreign citizens in Italy

In Italy, foreign citizens form a significant and consistent part of society and labour force, playing an increasingly pivotal role in maintaining welfare models.

¹ This article is the result of joint work by all authors. In particular, Barbara Boschetto authored paragraphs 3.1 and 5, Elisa Marzilli authored paragraphs 1 and 2 and Maria Elena Pontecorvo authored paragraphs 3 and 4.

Compared to the Italian population, they have a higher fertility rate, a younger demographic profile, and are predominantly employed in manual and unskilled occupations, particularly women in care and domestic assistance sectors. This has helped to counter the challenges of an ageing population and mitigate the progressive ageing of the labour force (Strozza, De Santis, 2017).

However, the pandemic also significantly impacted the employment status of foreigners, affecting not only labour market participation levels, but also the types and conditions of employment. While the demand for foreign labour increased overall during the economic crisis (2008–2013), especially for women in family services (De Rosa *et al.*, 2017), it was only in 2020, the year of the pandemic, that the employment rate of foreigners fell below that of Italians. Some empirical analyses demonstrate that the pandemic has accelerated the erosion of migrants' relative employment advantage: the worsening of employment opportunities appears to be primarily due to greater difficulties in entering or re-entering the labour market. For women in particular, this has translated into a greater risk of inactivity (Avola *et al.*, 2023). Recent studies reveal a gradual convergence of key labour market indicators between foreigners and Italians, particularly among certain foreign communities, age groups and levels of education (Capuano *et al.*, 2024; Istat, 2025; Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2024).

A long tradition of studies on labour migration offers analyses on the working conditions of foreigners and their segregation. Many studies refer to ethnic penalties or migrant-native gaps in labour markets (Reyneri, Fullin 2011; Cantalini *et al.*, 2023). The employment of foreigners from developing countries seems to be confined to poor-quality jobs, often irregular (Reyneri, 2003).

Therefore, on the one hand, the immigrant labour force has stabilised over time, gradually approaching the characteristics of the Italian labour force. On the other hand, significant inequalities and structural issues remain, such as the tendency to be allocated to so-called '3D' jobs (dirty, dangerous and demanding), as well as irregularity, informality and various forms of exploitation. Despite greater diversification among foreign workers and the growth of their entrepreneurship, many situations of precariousness, under-qualification, poor working conditions and a high risk of accidents remain widespread (Cillo, Perocco, 2024).

A tendency towards occupational segregation still exists, whereby immigrant workers are relegated to low-skilled sectors and occupations characterised by unstable working conditions and poor rights protection (Ambrosini, 2020). Many foreign workers, who are often employed in labour-intensive sectors with little social protection such as agriculture, construction, domestic services and personal care, work in informal or semi-informal contexts where the risk violation of fundamental rights is high (Avola, 2022; Palumbo, 2022). Furthermore, the way in which migrants seek employment can also increase their risk of becoming trapped in the

secondary labour market. The field of research on spatial segregation highlights the link between the role played by migration networks in determining the arrival and integration of migrants and the occupational specialisation (or segregation) of the various foreign communities residing in the country (Benassi, Ferrara, 2013; Conti *et al.*, 2023). While migratory social networks can increase employment opportunities and reduce the difficulty of relocation, they can also have a negative effect on the quality of employment, because they are limited to less skilled sectors (Casacchia *et al.*, 2022).

The complex phenomenon of intersectional discrimination overlaps with these dynamics. The intersectional approach demonstrates that the various axes of oppression (e.g. gender, ethnic origin, social class and migratory status) do not operate independently, but rather interact and reinforce one another, resulting in composite forms of discrimination (Avola *et al.*, cit; Bonini *et al.*, 2022). In the Italian context, for instance, being both female and foreign leads to a stratification of disadvantages in the labour market. Migrant women, for example, are often employed in highly feminised and poorly regulated sectors such as care and domestic work. Their condition as women is compounded by their status as migrants and, sometimes, as irregulars, leaving them particularly vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and the denial of rights (Degani, De Stefani, 2020; Massari, *et al.*, 2024). Although occupational and social segregation has been widely studied, most attention has been given to gender-based disparities. Comparative studies exploring segregation between native and immigrant workers - by origin or settlement area - remain limited (Paterno *et al.*, 2015).

Considering the above, this study critically examines recent trends in employment convergence and the underlying dynamics of the segregation and vulnerability of foreign labour in Italy. By focusing specifically on intersectional discrimination relating to gender, age, and citizenship, the analysis aims to reveal potential signs of labour market integration among foreigners that are obscured by a disadvantaged yet heterogeneous labour market.

2. Data and methods

The data used in this study come from the ISTAT – Labour Force Survey, covering 2024² the most recent year available, and 2014. The analysis focuses on the

² The survey provides the official estimates of the main aggregates of the labour market that are disaggregated by socio-demographic and employment characteristics. The survey is continuous and is carried out every week of the year, with results published monthly, quarterly and yearly. Participants are sampled adopting a two-stage sampling method. All household members over the age of fifteen are interviewed.

foreign population: in 2014 the sample included 44,727 foreigners, estimated to represent approximately 4.9 million; in 2024, 36,795 foreign citizens were interviewed, corresponding to an estimated 5.9 million individuals. The main socio-demographic variables (gender, age, geographical area, citizenship, years of residence in Italy and educational attainment) and some variables of the labour market were used; among these, the occupation - which in 2014 was surveyed according to the CP2011 Classification - was linked to the CP2021 in use in 2024.

The study begins with a comparative-descriptive analysis³ of the main indicators of the foreign labour market, then illustrates some indicators of occupational segregation and, finally, presents a multivariate analysis using binomial and multinomial logistic regression models.

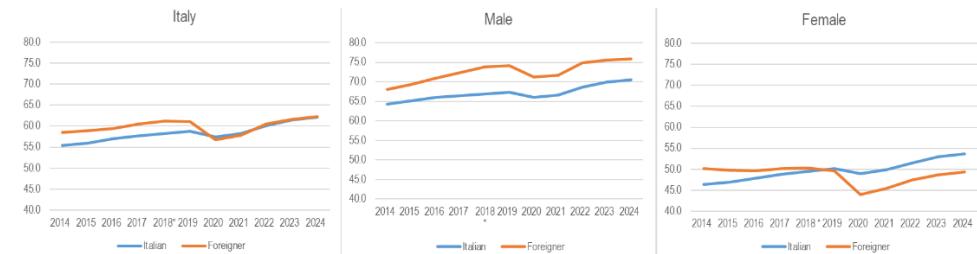
3. Employment gaps between foreign and Italian citizens

In 2024, the resident population in Italy aged 15-89 is made up of 90.6% Italian citizens (of whom 3.1% are naturalised) and 9.4% foreigners. Since work is one of the main drivers of migration, the presence of foreigners in the labour force is higher (10.4%), characterised by employment and unemployment rates traditionally higher than those of Italians. However, in recent years, the advantage of foreigners has shrunk considerably, bringing the employment rate to a similar value to that of Italians, also following the falling female employment rate during the crisis generated by the 2020 health emergency.

An examination of the main socio-demographic characteristics reveals significant differences. Among men, in fact, the advantage of foreigners (75.9%) is still evident, with employment rates about five points higher than those of Italians (70.5%); conversely, among foreign women the share of employed is lower (49.4% against 53.7% of Italians (Figure 1).

³ The time comparison takes into account the time series break, held in 2021, following the entry into force of the new European Regulation 2019/1700 establishing a common framework for European statistics on persons and households. The comparison between old and new series, for the overlap period 2018 -2020, shows a very similar pattern of estimates.

Figure 1 - Employment rate of foreigners and Italians by sex. Years 2014-2024 (percentage values).



Source: Istat, Labour Force Survey

Furthermore, the employment rates of these two groups are influenced by the differing age distribution of the population between 15 and 64 years of age: 62.1% of the foreign population is under 45 years of age, compared to around 50% of Italians. Among 15-24 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds, foreigners have higher employment rates than Italians, due to their earlier entry into the labour market and greater longevity in older age brackets, particularly among women.

3.1. The gaps between the main foreign communities

Although the foreign presence in Italy is very heterogeneous, the top 10 nationalities account for 66% of the total foreign population. The most numerous communities are Romanian, representing 21.9% of foreign nationals, followed by Albanian (9.0%), Moroccan (8.9%), Chinese (5.0%), Ukrainian (4.8%), Indian (4.8%), Bangladeshi (3.5%), Filipino (3.0%), Moldovan (2.8%), Peruvian (2.5%).

Migratory networks contribute to occupational concentration in certain sectors through mechanisms that replicate the dissemination of information, knowledge, and support among relatives and compatriots. As a result, labour market dynamics vary significantly depending on citizenship, being closely linked to the sectors of economic activity in which communities are mostly employed, to specific sectoral skills and also to their gender gap.

Of the ten largest nationality groups, Filipinos (82.0%), Chinese (72.6%) and Peruvians (72.3%) had the highest overall employment rates in 2024. Within these communities, the employment rates for both genders are similar. There has been a marked improvement in the employment rate for Albanians, which has risen over the last decade for both sexes (from 66.3% to 78.1% for men, and from 34.3% to 44.3% for women). The rate for Romanian men also increased (from 69.7 to 78.3%), while it worsened for Romanian women (from 56.7 to 52.2%). Some communities are characterised by a very large disadvantage for women: Moroccans, Bangladeshis and Indians. Over the last 10 years, this gap has grown, and today, the employment rate

for Moroccan men exceeds that of Moroccan women by almost 50 points, by 60 points for Indians, and by 70 points for Bangladeshis.

The analysis by occupation⁴ confirms the segmentation of the foreign labour market. In 2024, 61.1% of foreign employees held unskilled or manual roles (compared to 29% of Italian employees), while 39.7% of Italian employees were in skilled roles (managerial, specialist or technical), compared to 9.2% of foreign employees. Particular concentrations are observed by citizenship and gender. Filipinos (68.8%) and Indians (48%) are mainly employed in unskilled professions, as are Moroccans and Peruvians (35%). Blue-collar workers are common among Albanians (47%), Romanians (above 40%) and Moroccans, and are becoming increasingly prevalent among Ukrainians and Moldavians. In general, more than half of foreign men are employed in blue-collar occupations. Citizenships with a higher proportion of medium-skilled service sector roles include Ukrainians, Moldovans and Peruvians (particularly women employed as caregivers and personal assistants), while clerical and skilled roles in commerce, accommodation and food services are more prevalent among Chinese nationals (55.4%) and Bangladeshis (38.8%). Although the foreign labour market is so strongly segregated, a 10-year comparison shows an increase in the share of foreigners in skilled, white-collar and trade occupations (particularly in the trade, accommodation and food service occupations, +3.8 p.p.), an increase that is also present in the Italian component but to a lesser extent. Over the decade considered, the share of foreign workers in unskilled occupations also decreased (from 35.6% to 29.4%), particularly among women, who recorded a drop of more than 11 percentage points, and in skilled service occupations (from 13.2% to 11.7%).

4. The segregation of the foreign labour market.

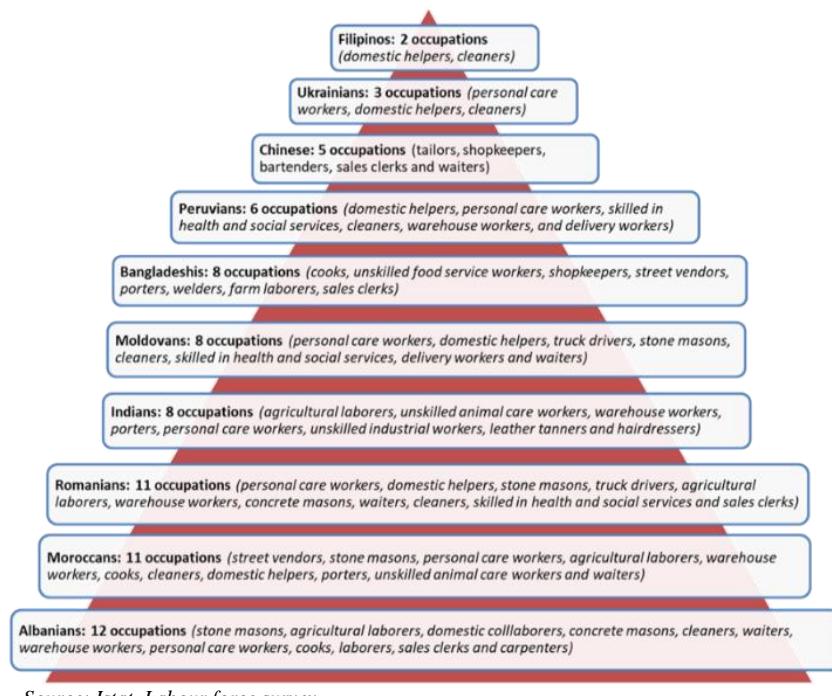
Looking at the cumulative distribution of foreign workers by occupational unit (4-digit level of CP2021), in 2024 about half were employed in just 15 occupations, mainly low-skilled and manual roles, with a few belonging to major group 5 (personal care workers, cooks and waiters, sales and service staff, health professionals). Over the past decade, this number increased slightly (11 occupations

⁴ The occupations have been grouped into five macro-categories derived from the first and second levels of the CP2021 Classification of Occupations: 1) skilled occupations, include managers, professionals and technicians, from the first, second and third Major groups of the CP2021; 2) medium-skilled occupations in office and trade, such as clerical and trade workers, from the fourth Major group and the trade, hotel and restaurant occupations from groups 5.1 and 5.2; 3) medium-skilled occupations in personal services include occupations in groups 5.3 to 5.6; 4) blue-collar workers include occupations from the sixth and seventh Major groups; 5) unskilled occupations from the eighth Major group.

in 2014), but the occupational structure remained largely unchanged, with only 4 new occupations added. The pattern differs for Italians: half of Italian workers are employed in 48 occupations, a stable figure over ten years, though the specific jobs changed, reflecting a more dynamic labour market for natives. The situation is relatively better among young foreigners: in 2024 half of the foreign employed between the ages of 15 and 39 work in 20 different occupations, a larger number than that observed for the overall foreign employed population.

By contrast, Italians work in 44 different occupations, a smaller number than that of employed Italians overall. For both groups there has been an advance, but among foreigners this has not corresponded to the addition of skilled occupations while among Italians in ten years many occupations of Major Group 2 (mainly education-related) make an appearance. More critical is the situation for the female component, which experiences a double segregation, of gender and nationality: half of foreign employment is absorbed by just 5 professions (it was only 2 in 2014), compared to 21 for Italian women. An analysis based on nationality reveals considerable heterogeneity with a “pyramidal structure” (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Number of occupational units covering 50% of employment, by citizenship.

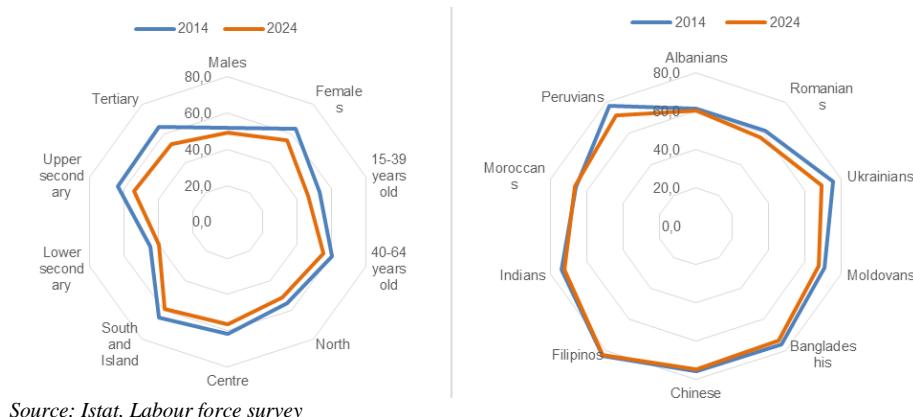


Source: Istat, Labour force survey

The integration of Albanians, Moroccans and Romanians into the labour market is more widespread and forms the base of the pyramid, while Filipinos are at the top, with more than half employed in just two occupations: domestic and office cleaning services.

A summary measure of segregation used in the literature is Duncan's dissimilarity index⁵, which quantifies how evenly individuals are distributed among occupational units. The dissimilarity index in 2024 was 0.51. This means that 51% of foreign (or Italian) workers would need to change occupations in order for the two groups of workers to be evenly distributed across all occupations. The index reveals higher segregation in the South and Island, among women, older workers, and those with medium-high education levels, confirming the low returns to education for foreigners (Istat, 2023) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Duncan's dissimilarity index by sex, age groups, geographical area, educational attainment and citizenship. Years 2014-2024. Percentage values.



Over the past decade, the index improved from 56% in 2014, with notable decreases among young workers, whose segregation decreased from 53% to 46%, and among those with higher education. This represents a promising sign for the integration of new generations. By nationality, the index confirms the highest level of occupational segregation among Filipinos (83.2%, unchanged over 10 years), and slightly lower values for Albanians and Romanians. Notably, all ten most

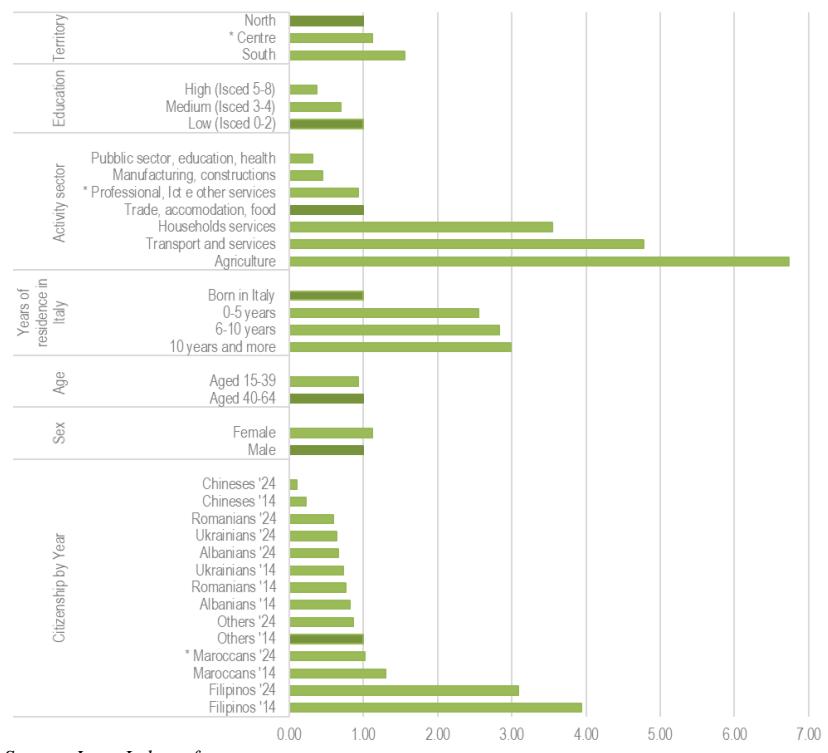
⁵ $D = (1/2) \times \sum |(a_i / A) - (b_i / B)|$: a_i is the number of Italian workers in occupational unit i ; A is the total number of Italian workers; b_i is the number of foreign workers in occupational unit i ; B is the total number of foreign workers. D is bounded by 0 (no segregation) and 1 (perfect segregation).

represented nationalities in Italy exhibit index values above the average, suggesting that greater presence in the country translates into greater segregation.

5. A comparison across years and among nationalities by means a logistic regression models

The probability for foreigners to be employed in an unskilled occupation was analysed using a simple logistic regression model, which allowed us to calculate odds ratios (ORs) with relative 95% confidence intervals, adjusted for potential confounders (age, gender, geographical area, years of residence in Italy, educational attainment and sector of economic activity). The model was applied to only employed foreigners aged 15-64 for the years 2014 and 2024. Stratifying by citizenship and reference year, there is a lower propensity to be employed in unskilled occupations in 2024 than in 2014, for all citizenships (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Being employed in an unskilled occupation. Binomial logistic regression model Years 2014-2024.

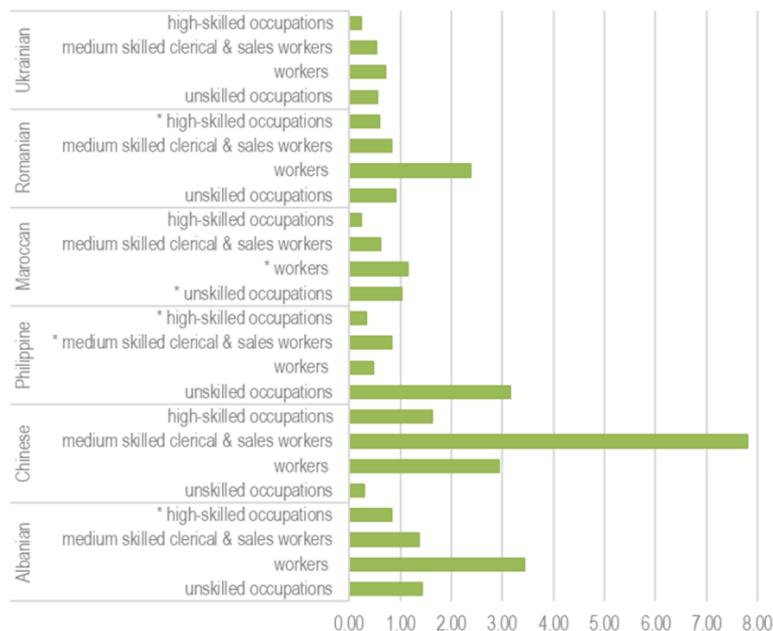


Source: Istat, Labour force survey

Filipinos, while remaining the migratory group with the significantly higher propensity to be in unskilled employment, show an improvement over the 10 years: in 2014 the probability was 4 times higher than “other” nationalities (3.9; IC95% 3.38-4.50), while it drops to 3 times in 2024 (3.0; IC95% 2.57-3.65).

A second multinomial logistic regression model was applied to the population of employed foreigners aged 15-64, limited to 2024, to test the different probability of being employed in one of the macro-categories into which the occupations were grouped. The response variable is the 5-mode recoded occupation, as depicted above; the mode chosen as reference is the “medium-skilled in services” occupation for all citizenships (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Being employed in “medium-skilled in services” occupation: Multinomial logistic regression model: Year 2024.



Source: Istat, Labour force survey

Chinese show a propensity for employment in trade and restaurants almost 8 times higher than in services; they are also significantly represented in blue-collar or skilled/entrepreneurial occupations. Romanians and Albanians have a higher propensity in blue-collar occupations, the latter also in unskilled and trade occupations. Filipinos are 3 times more likely to have an unskilled occupation. Ukrainians, instead, are less likely to be employed in all other occupations than in

the medium-skilled service occupation taken as a reference. This is due to the frequent employment of Ukrainian women as caregivers in households.

Conclusions

The foreign labour market in Italy is highly concentrated in specific sectors and occupations, characterised by manual and low-skilled roles. Migration networks perpetuate this concentration of employment: citizenship is closely linked to the occupation and sectoral skills of different communities, as well as the gender disparities within them. It is a 'restricted' labour market: over 50% of foreign workers are employed in just 15 occupations, compared to 48 among Italians.

This figure drops drastically for foreign women, with half employed in only five occupations. However, over 10 years, the occupational structure of foreign workers shows slight signs of improvement, which are more pronounced among women and young people, who gain employment in skilled occupations. This condition does not improve significantly with the length of time spent in Italy.

Compared to 2014, the proportion of people employed in unskilled occupations has decreased for all nationalities except Indians, with the largest decrease being seen among Chinese and Ukrainian workers. The proportion of blue-collar workers increases among Bangladeshis and Ukrainians. The proportion of medium-skilled occupations in services increases among Albanians and Chinese, and decreases among Ukrainians, Moldovans, and Peruvians — nationalities in which they are prevalent, especially female caregivers. Medium-skilled occupations in commerce, hotels and restaurants have increased, especially among Ukrainians.

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