

MARRIAGE AND CITIZENSHIP AMONG IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY: A CLOSER LOOK¹

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Abstract. The integration pathways for migrants are complex and consist of multiple steps that can vary depending on a wide range of factors, such as legal status, education level, language skills, and host country policies. Moreover, the sequence of these steps may differ significantly from one individual to another. The paper investigates the relationship between the legal integration pathway (residence permit and acquisition of citizenship) and marriage. One of the original contributions of this work lies in the use of integrated administrative microdata sources. The analysis is based on two different cohorts of first residence permits issued in 2014 and 2018, which were integrated both with data on marriages and on citizenship acquisitions and new citizens. Using a longitudinal perspective, the hypothesis of this study is that personal and migratory characteristics influence migrants' integration paths.

1. Framework, hypothesis, and aims

The integration pathways for migrants are complex and consist of multiple steps. The aim of this study is to reconstruct and analyze, through the integration of administrative archives, the order of some key stages in the family trajectories of individuals of foreign origin in Italy. More specifically, the following research hypotheses lead our study:

1. Personal and migratory characteristics influence migrants' integration paths. Particular attention is paid to gender and citizenship as factors that affect both the migration project and the integration process as well as crucial event in life course such as marriage: to what extent do migrants in Italy get married, and how does this vary by reason for migration and gender? Which citizenships marry more frequently?

2. In contemporary migrations, characterized by greater mobility, the timing of certain events that shape integration processes do not necessarily follow the classic stages. At which stage of their settlement or integration path do migrants typically marry?

¹ Although the paper is the result of joint work, sections are attributed as follows: paragraphs 1, 2, 3 and 4.2 to Cinzia Conti and paragraphs 4.1 and 5 to Antonella Guarneri.

The analysis will focus on three key moments in the migration path: the first residence permit, the marriage, and the acquisition of citizenship.

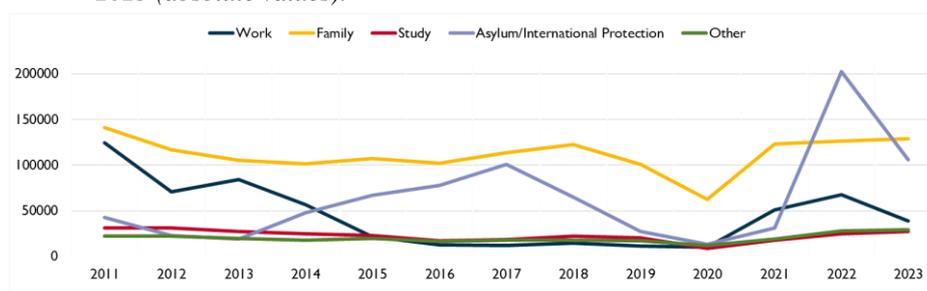
By adopting a longitudinal perspective, the residence permit is linked to marriage and to acquisition of citizenship. This serves both to study different behaviors and to observe the timing and order of events. Considering the information about the reason of the residence permit, the hypothesis is that migrants arrived for work are more likely to marry in Italy than asylum seekers. However, women who migrated for work, after intermarriage, experience high employment penalties (Justiniano Medina and Valentova, 2025).

Our starting point of analysis are two different cohorts of arrival (year of first residence permit): 2014 and 2018 cohorts (both just over 160,000 individuals). What happens to these cohorts in the subsequent years?

2. Theoretical background

The integration pathways for migrants are complex and consist of multiple steps that can vary depending on a wide range of factors, such as legal status, education level, language skills, and host country policies. Moreover, the sequence of these steps may differ significantly from one individual to another (Penninx & Garcés-Masareñas, 2016; European Commission, 2020). Obtaining a residence permit is a first step towards integration for many migrants. Through the residence permit, migrants start their regular process of inclusion. We know that today not all the migrants have permanent migratory projects, temporary and circular migrations are growing, but the residence permit gives to non-Eu citizens the minimal rights for integrating. In recent years, the reasons for coming to Italy have changed (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – *Non-Eu citizens inflows in Italy by reason of the residence permit. Years 2011-2023 (absolute values).*



Source: Istat, 2024.

The primary motivation is family, and work permits have increased again only in recent years after a long period of stagnation (also due to the absence of flow decrees). Starting from the past decade, permits granted to people seeking international protection have become very significant (Bonifazi and Conti, 2025). In 2022, there was a peak in the number of new residence permits issued for protection due to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. However, already the following year, a decline was recorded in residence permits issued for asylum and international protection, which dropped from over 200,000 in 2022 to around 106,000 in 2023 (-47.6%). Even though the levels of new asylum permits remained high.

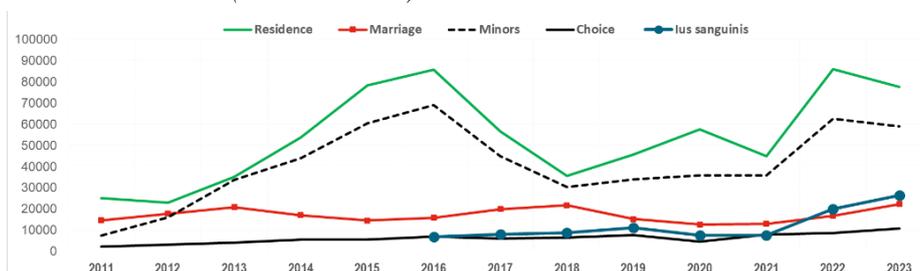
According to literature marriage and family formation/reunification represent an essential step in the route towards integration, especially mixed marriages. These familiar dynamics are indicators of broader social, economic, and cultural integration and, on the other hand, the cultural and migratory background significantly influence family stability. Andersson *et al.* (2015) highlight that family patterns among immigrants and ethnic minority families serve as indicators of their integration into the host society. In a similar way, Hannemann *et al.* (2020) highlight that the context of the receiving country plays a crucial role in shaping partnership behaviors, indicating that local societal norms and policies significantly impact immigrant family dynamics. On the other hand, different cultural backgrounds influence marriage behaviors. Different studies discuss how cultural and family systems from immigrants' countries of origin impact their marital behaviors and that reflects the varying family dynamics and social norms prevalent in different cultures (Kulu, & González-Ferrer, 2014; Gabrielli *et al.* 2019; Hannemann *et al.* 2020). These studies emphasize the importance of recognizing the heterogeneity within immigrant groups, as factors like origin, migration reasons, and socioeconomic status can lead to differing family behaviours. Furthermore, disruption theory suggests that the economic and psychological burdens of migration create stress, which subsequently results in temporary discontinuities in marital behavior. An exception is made for cases where the marriage has already been planned in advance and represents the very starting point of the integration process in a new country.

In Italy in 2023, marriages with at least one foreign spouse are 29,732 (16.1% on total weddings): of these, more than two out of three concerns mixed couples (intermarriages). Mixed marriages (where one spouse is Italian and the other is a foreign national) totalled 21,211, continuing to represent the largest share of marriages involving at least one foreign spouse (71.3%). Nearly three-quarters of mixed marriages involved an Italian groom and a foreign bride (15,389 cases), 8.4% of all weddings in 2023. Marriages between two foreign citizens totalled 8,521 in 2023. Of these, 5,184 involved at least one spouse residing in Italy, while the remaining 3,337 were celebrated in Italy by non-residents.

The possibility to distinguish the citizenship status of Italian spouses - by birth or by acquisition - makes it possible to shed light on marriage behaviors based on migratory background. In 2023, among mixed marriages, 14.6% involve a spouse who acquired Italian citizenship; in 2018, this share was exactly half. Among marriages between two Italian spouses, those in which at least one partner is Italian by acquisition account for 4.5%, a share more than doubled since 2018 (Istat, 2024b).

The acquisition of citizenship is considered an indicator of advanced stabilization and integration (Conti, Tucci, Strozza, 2021; Bloemraad, 2023), especially in a country like Italy in which in general non-Eu citizens need 10 years of regular residence to apply for Italian citizenship. When analyzing the modes of acquisition of Italian citizenship of non-EU citizens in 2023, the most significant share concerns acquisitions through residence (nearly 78,000) and by minors through parental transmission (over 59,000). Together, these two categories account for nearly 70% of all citizenship acquisitions (Figure 2). In addition, the largest relative increase was recorded in citizenship granted *iure sanguinis*, which continued to grow in 2023 compared to both 2021 (+241%) and 2022 (+31%).

Figure 2 – Acquisitions of Italian citizenship of resident non-Eu citizens by reason. Years 2011-2023 (absolute values).



Source: Istat, 2024.

It has to be stressed that there is a strong link between marriage and acquisition of citizenship even if it does not clear which of the two phenomena tends to precede the other in most observed cases. Many acquisitions of citizenship in Italy are based on “marriage”. The Italian citizenship may be granted through marriage, under the following conditions: the applicant, whether a foreign national or stateless person, must be married to an Italian citizen and must have legally resided in Italy for at least two years following the marriage. If the spouses reside abroad, the application may be submitted after three years after the date of marriage. These timeframes are halved in the presence of children born to or adopted by the spouses. In 2023 Italy registered 22.330 acquisitions of citizenship based on marriage; in 10 years (2014-2023) they have been almost 170.000.

The choice of partner is affected by both individual preferences and contextual factors (Kalmijn, 1998). Furthermore, getting married to a native and then acquiring the citizenship of the host country can certainly make easier entry into the labour market and into the host society. However, it is not always true that the wedding takes place after an integration process; it could rather indicate a request for integration (Azzolini and Guetto, 2017). This request takes on an even different meaning if the mixed marriage concerns a foreign citizen and an Italian one by acquisition (Guarneri, Strozza and Tucci, 2021). Furthermore, only marriage enables potential citizens to follow the marriage-based route, despite the rising prevalence of nonmarital partnerships, underscores its unique role in immigration policy (McAvay and Waldinger, 2021).

3. Data and methods

Since the early '90s the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) disseminates data on residence permits on the basis of the data supplied by the Ministry of Interior. The available variables include key demographic characteristics of the migrant, along with the reason for the residence permit and its issuance date.

The Survey on marriages collected from Istat allows monitoring trends by the main socio-demographic characteristics of husbands and wives who decide to marry besides the information about the marriage itself.

The "Acquisitions of citizenships" provided by Istat are estimates came from a database based on the stock 2011 individual census data, the data on the type of acquisition from Ministry of Interior and the data of the new micro-demographic accounting information system (updated to 2023). In a previous research, this estimates dataset allows identifying the foreign-born resident in Italy and observing, through a longitudinal approach, whether they have acquired Italian citizenship over time (Strozza, Conti and Tucci, 2021).

One of the paper's original contributions lies in its use of integrated administrative microdata sources that had never been linked before. The analysis is based on two different cohorts of newly issued residence permits, which were linked with data on marriages and on citizenship acquisitions (flow data).

Determinist linkage, performed by an anonymised key, allows to follow cohort of new arrivals (new residence permits) during the time, analysing their propensity to marry taking into account the different reasons at the basis of the permit (work, study, protection, etc.) and the propensity to acquire the Italian citizenship. This longitudinal analysis is affected by a bias, as it is not possible to take naturalization acquisitions into account due to the limited observation period; therefore, the focus is mainly on those acquired through marriage.

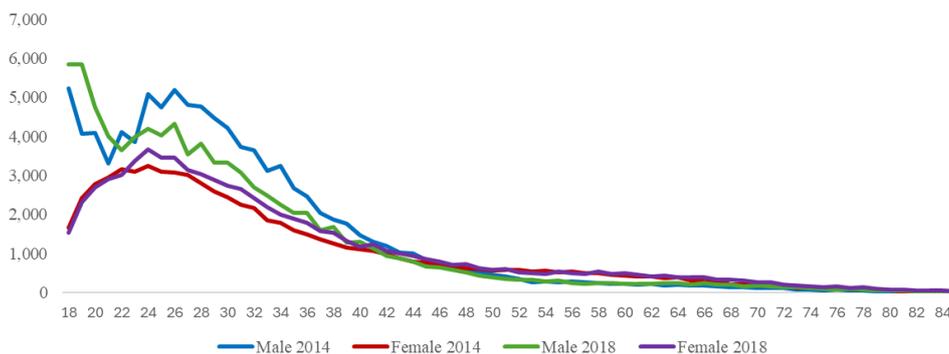
This is a descriptive and exploratory investigation offering, for the first time, the possibility to cross-analyze information drawn from several distinct archives and to better address future highly refined statistical analyses.

4. Main results

4.1 Longitudinal approach: analysis by cohort of arrival and type of event

The study was conducted on two cohorts, 2014 and 2018. The first cohort consists of 233,000 migrants, more than 203,000 of whom are over 18 years of age, while the second includes 242,000 migrants, more than 179,000 of whom are over 18. Women represent 41.8% of the 2014 cohort and 45.3% of the 2018 cohort (Figure 3). As can be observed, migrants are predominantly young and therefore largely included in the marriage market.

Figure 3 – *Non-eu citizens inflows by sex and age - Cohorts of arrival 2014 and 2018 (absolute values).*



Source: our elaborations on Istat data.

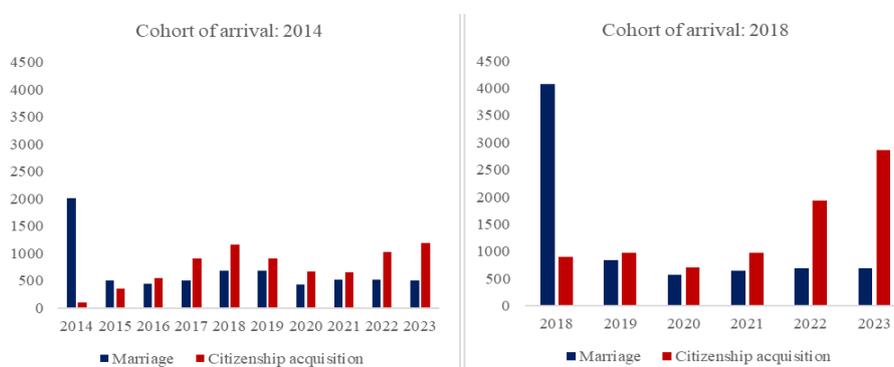
Studies already conducted on non-Eu citizens show a lower tendency to settle in the area among people who arrive seeking international protection. It can be hypothesized that there may also be a lower tendency to form a family among those who remain in the area but in a still temporary condition.

The combination of events most frequently occurred in a time span of 5 years for different cohorts of arrival in Italy is “no marriage and no citizenship acquisition”, followed by “marriage and no citizenship acquisition”. These results are coherent with the legislation about citizenship that only rarely allows citizenship before 10 years of residence. From a cohort-of-arrival perspective, marriage remains a relevant

pathway to acquiring citizenship. In general, across cohorts as well, the peak in citizenship acquisitions occurs four/five years after marriage (Figure 4).

The trend of citizenship acquisition for 2018 cohort was affected by the impact of COVID-19. As a matter of fact, in 2020 and 2021 the share of acquisitions is particularly low. Besides, the legislative changes regulating the timelines for acquiring citizenship inevitably also impact on 2018 cohort downward trend.²

Figure 4 – Marriage and acquisition of Italian citizenship by cohort of arrival of non-eu citizens (absolute values).



Source: our elaborations on Istat data.

For comparability purposes between the two chosen cohorts, we decided to focus on a five-year time span after the issuance of a first residence permit³. After five years, 2.8 percent of non-EU citizens who arrived in Italy in 2014 were married (1.6 percent for men and 4.6 percent for women); for those arrived in 2018 the share rises to 4.8 percent (respectively 2.9 and 6.9 for men and women). When we look at the patterns of marriage among non-EU migrants five years after their arrival, clear differences emerge between men and women, depending on the reason for migration.

Starting with work-related migration, marriage is quite rare for both genders. However, women tend to marry slightly more than men in this category. For example, in the 2018 cohort, around 4.1 of women who came for work reasons got married within five years, compared to only 1.5% of men (Figure 5). Although the overall marriage rate is low here, this small gender gap suggests that even among

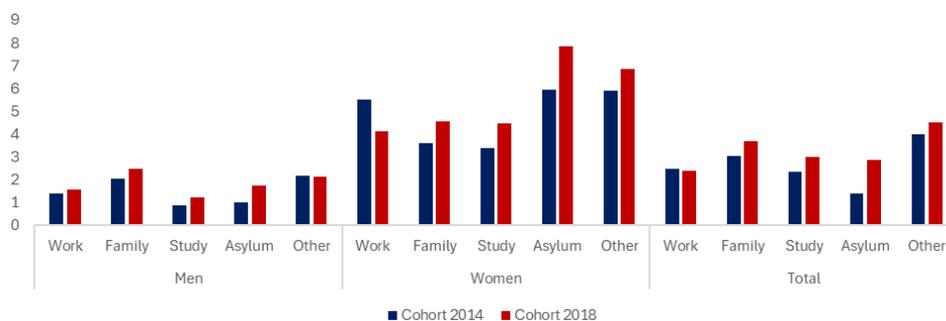
² Decree-Law No. 130 of 2020 (converted into Law No. 173 of 2020), came into effect on December 19, 2020, replaced the previous longer deadline for the completion of the proceedings of citizenship acquisitions (48 months) introduced in 2018. Today, the deadline is again of 24-months (extendable up to a maximum of 36 months) from the date of application submission.

³ The term 'first residence permit' refers to the issuance of a new permit, not a renewal. Of course, the person may have previously held a permit that expired and was not renewed, and then, after some time, obtained another one, which is considered a new permit.

labor migrants, women may be more likely to establish family ties after arrival. The gender effect is observed in both cohorts: for the 2014 cohort, within the five years following arrival, 5.5% of women and 1.4% of men got married.

The family migration category shows the highest marriage rates, especially for women. In the 2014 cohort, 3.6% of women who migrated for family reasons were married within five years, and this figure rises to 4.5% for the 2018 cohort. Among men, the rates are much lower: around 2% in 2014 and 2.5% in 2018. This aspect deserves further investigation to understand whether these are young women reuniting with their parents in order to get married in Italy.

Figure 5 – Marriage (occurred in the subsequent 5 years after arrival) of non-Eu citizens by sex and reason of the permit. Cohorts of arrival 2014 and 2018 (percentages).



Source: our elaborations on Istat data.

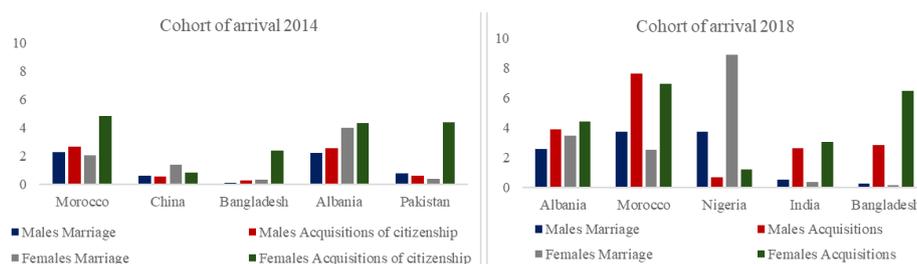
Among those who came to study, gender differences persist. Women again get married more frequently than men. In the cohort of 2018, for instance, about 4.5% of female students married within five years, compared to just 1.2% of male students. This might indicate that female students are more likely to build social and family ties during their studies or are more likely to stay and settle after their education.

For those arriving for asylum or international protection, marriage patterns are more variegated. In the 2014 cohort, women had a significantly higher marriage rate (around 5.9%) compared to men (around 1%). A similar pattern is observed in the 2018 cohort: about 8% of women and 1.7% of men married within five years.

Particular attention will be given to different citizenship groups to highlight distinct behaviors and integration trajectories (Figure 6). In particular, the combination between sex and citizenship offer us a valuable opportunity to outline different profiles. The 4.0 percent of Albanian women arrived in Italy in 2014 appears married 5 years later (the highest percentage among the main citizenships present in Italy); also, among men, albeit to a lesser extent, the Albanian community shows the highest propensity to marry in Italy. For the 2018 cohort of arrival the situation appears radically different in terms of propensity to marry: the 8.9 percent

of Nigerian women appears married 5 years later. Albanians and Moroccans are also the groups that acquire citizenship the most within five years after arrival.

Figure 6 – Marriage and acquisition of citizenship (occurred in the subsequent 5 years after arrival) of non-Eu citizens by sex and main citizenships. Cohorts of arrival 2014 and 2018 (percentages).



Source: our elaborations on Istat data.

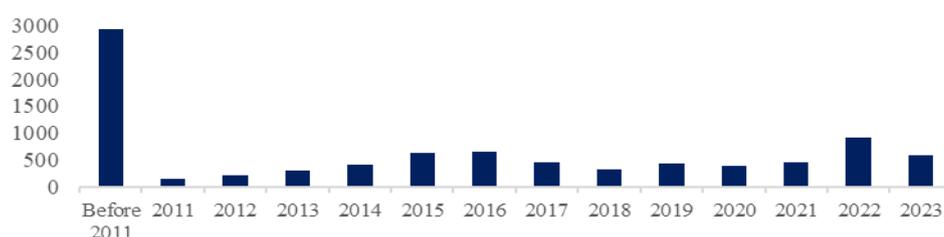
To better understand the results, it is important to stress that in Italy ordinary naturalisation is not possible before ten years of residence, except for certain groups to whom shorter residence requirements apply (four years for EU citizens and five years for recognised refugees and stateless persons). On total acquisitions the ones by marriage are 51.0 for the 2014 cohort of arrival but with a strong gender differentiation (26.7 for men and 62.9 for women); for the cohort of 2018 acquisitions by marriage are lowering to 19.0 of total acquisitions (9.2 for men and 27.0 for women). This data highlights important gender differences in naturalization patterns. In the 2014 cohort, marriage was a key channel for women to gain citizenship. In the 2018 cohort, while the overall citizenship acquisition rates increased, the reliance on marriage as a means decreased, pointing to broader or more autonomous integration trajectories, particularly for women. Even if it concerns small numbers, this evolution deserves further attention, especially to understand the reasons at the basis of the changes. For example, it is also important taking into account changes in migration flows and the arrival of minors who acquire citizenship through their parents, prior to independent transmission.

4.2 Focus on new Italians involved in 2023 marriages

Parallel to the integration process that culminates in acquiring citizenship, increasingly diverse paths are observed, with marriage becoming an increasingly common option among those who have already obtained citizenship. A significant increase in the presence of Italians by acquisition at the time of marriage is observing. This phenomenon is due to multiple factors. Firstly, in recent years,

citizenship acquisition has become more common, in line with a more advanced process of integration for foreign citizens. Considering the anticipating mean age at marriage that characterize foreign spouses or spouses with foreign background, the 33.1 percent of “new” Italians that got married in 2023 had acquired the Italian citizenship before 2011 Italian Census (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – *New Italian citizens who married in 2023 by year of citizenship acquisition (absolute values).*



Source: our elaborations on Istat data.

Record linkage revealed that, among those who acquired Italian citizenship before 2011, over 80 percent were individuals born in Italy rather than immigrants. In this case we refer to the second generation in strict sense. If we observe also their age, they are quite young: more than 30 percent are under 33 years old. A large part of new Italians that get married in Italy have acquired the citizenship presumably by choice at age of 18 or by transmission from their parents. This appears to be an interesting point to reflect on and that requires deeper analysis.

5. Discussion and further steps

Integration paths are numerous and strongly differ in the sequence of their stages.

On one side, there has been a gradual decrease/stabilization in the share of citizenship acquisitions through marriage. On the other side, adopting a cohort of arrival perspective, marriage remains a relevant way to acquire citizenship, most of all in a medium-short term.

In general, across cohorts as well, the peak in citizenship acquisitions occurs five years after marriage. Moreover, the extension of the observation period will make it possible to take into account citizenship acquisitions through other procedures as well, such as those by naturalization.

The increased relevance of using administrative data sources in the production of official statistics in Italy has intensified the register-based approach. Seizing this opportunity, the paper seeks to reconstruct, from a longitudinal perspective and

through the integration of microdata sources, the family and migratory behaviors of individuals of foreign origin living in Italy over the past decade.

The results presented here should be considered as the first outcomes of a complex data integration process which, over time, will be able to capture the complexity of integration phenomena that now concern the first generations of migrants — who, as we have seen, have changed in terms of profile and characteristics over time — as well as their descendants.

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