MIGRANTS' SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ITALIAN CASE

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Abstract. Numerous studies have shown that securing a first job is a crucial step in the integration of migrants. In Italy, the labour market is highly segmented, often penalising migrants based on their gender, country of origin, age at arrival, as well as their migration motives and long-term settlement intentions. This study uses unique data from the 2024 FOLCSI Survey, funded by AGE-IT Project Spoke 1, to analyse the socio-demographic and migration determinants associated with access to first paid employment in Italy. Binary logistic regression models are used to examine how individual and migratory characteristics influence the likelihood of obtaining a first paid job. The results highlight significant disadvantages for women and non-economic migrants, while factors such as age at arrival and educational attainment also play a crucial role. When analysed separately by gender, the results confirm the existence of structural barriers that hinder access to employment at the beginning of the migration process. This highlights the importance of considering individual characteristics upon arrival in order to better understand employment disparities among migrants.

1. Introduction

Once a country of emigration, Italy has become a key destination in Southern Europe (Colombo and Dalla Zuanna, 2019; Fellini *et al*., 2023). The coutry represents one of the European countries where employment plays a central role in migrants' socio-economic integration. However, migrants' integration into the Italian labour market remains problematic, due to a highly segmented employment model characterised by informality and limited vertical mobility, particularly for women (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011; Ambrosini, 2013; Avola, 2015).

The structure of the Italian labour market tends to favour the employment of foreign labour in low-skilled sectors, thereby limiting access to stable positions that are consistent with the skills acquired in their countries of origin (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011; Ballarino and Panichella, 2015). This phenomenon is further exacerbated by factors related to the geographical origin and the motivation to migrate, both of which have a significant influence on the likelihood of being employed (Cantalini *et al*., 2023; Impicciatore and Molinari, 2025).

Furthermore, the transition to the first paid job follows different paths. On one hand, men tend to migrate more frequently for economic reasons and are more likely

to find employment upon arrival. On the other hand, women migrate more often for family reunification reasons and have lower overall participation rates (Ballarino and Panichella, 2015). Intentions upon arrival also play a crucial role in shaping employment trajectories, in fact individuals planning a long-term stay pursue structured employment and social integration from the initial stage, on contrary migrants who declare temporary migration plans tend to prioritize rapid entry into the labor market, accepting precarious but remunerative forms of employment (Ambrosini, 2013).

The study makes use of unique data derived from the Survey on "Formation, Employment, Care Work and Health of Immigrants and persons with migratory background in Italy" (FOLCSI - Italian acronym), carried out in 2024 and funded by the Extended Partnership "AGE-IT Ageing Well in an Ageing Society" (see Data and Methods Section for further information on the Survey).

Binary logistic regression models were used to estimate the likelihood of obtaining a first paid job as a function of variables referred to the time of arrival, (i.e. collected through retrospective responses provided at the time of the survey) including gender, age at arrival, country of origin, reason for migration and migration intentions.

The analysis pursues two main objectives: first, to isolate the effect of pre-migration characteristics at the time of entry into the labour market; second, to identify possible systematic differences between migrant categories. Specifically, the aim is to assess whether certain characteristics—such as being female, coming from non-EU countries, or migrating for non-economic reasons—constitute persistent disadvantages already at the early stages of the integration process.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and a review of the literature on the structural barriers and differential opportunities that shape migrants' access to and positioning within the Italian labour market. Section 3 describes data, variables and models used in the analyses. Section 4 presents the descriptive analyses and discusses the results of the estimated models. Conclusions and future steps follow.

2. Theoretical background, literature and research hypotheses

The integration of migrants into the Italian labour market has been a key topic in demographic, sociological and economic debates for over two decades, particularly with regard to the quality of integration and access to paid employment (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011; Dustmann *et al*., 2016). Italy is a particularly interesting case in the European context for several reasons. Firstly, it is a country of relatively recent immigration, having undergone a rapid and chaotic transition from an emigration country to a destination for migrants (Colombo and Dalla Zuanna, 2019). Secondly, migrants show a low risk of unemployment, but face strong disadvantages in

accessing skilled or non-manual jobs (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011; Avola, 2015; Cantalini *et al*., 2023). The Italian labour market is highly segmented and often informal. This segmentation is exacerbated by the geographical origin of migrants: non-EU migrants face higher barriers to accessing skilled jobs, while Eastern Europeans concentrate in low-skilled sectors (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011).

Entry into first employment represents a crucial stage in migrants' working careers. Numerous studies have shown that characteristics at the time of arrival—such as gender, reason for migration, age, and human capital—significantly influence both the access to and the quality of employment (Chiswick, 1999; Ballarino and Panichella, 2015). Economic migrants tend to enter the labor market more easily and quickly, although often in low-skilled sectors. On the contrary, migrants who leave their country for family or humanitarian reasons encounter greater obstacles, related to legal constraints, lack of support networks and less transferability of skills (Impicciatore and Molinari, 2025).

Migration intentions at the time of arrival also influence employment strategies. Temporary migrants often accept precarious but well-paid jobs, whereas those who intend to stay permanently tend to seek greater professional and social integration (Ambrosini, 2013; Ballarino and Panichella, 2015).

Furthermore, gender plays a crucial role, in fact female migrants show lower labour force participation and greater occupational segregation. They are often disadvantaged both in terms of access to employment and quality of the jobs they obtain, regardless of their educational level or the skills acquired in their country of origin, which often exceed the requirements of the positions they occupy in Italy, frequently concentrated in the care sector (Ballarino and Panichella, 2015). In particular, migrant women have lower job mobility and take much longer than men to find their first job, especially in cases of migration for family or humanitarian reasons. When they do find work, they tend to be concentrated in low-skilled sectors with poor prospects for advancement, often remaining trapped in precarious or unrewarding jobs or relegated to care work and caregiving (Impicciatore and Molinari, 2025).

Finally, age at arrival is a key factor in determining migrants' employment opportunities. Those who arrive at a young age are more likely to acquire host-country-specific skills, learn the language and build more stable and consistent employment pathways over time (Dustmann *et al*., 2016).

Considering the theoretical framework outlined and consistent with the national and international literature, this study aims to test the following hypotheses:

H1. Migrants who arrived in Italy for economic reasons have a higher likelihood of accessing a first paid job than those who came to this country for family or humanitarian reasons, due to a stronger orientation towards the labour market and a more favourable selection in terms of employment characteristics.

H2. Migrants who, upon arrival, declare stable migratory intentions, need more time and efforts to obtain a first job than those with temporary, flexibles or indefinite plans. Long-term planning is associated with strategies that are more oriented towards professional integration.

H3. Migrant women encounter more difficulties in accessing their first job than men, particularly if they come from non-European countries or hold poorly recognised qualifications. The gender dimension, in interaction with origin and human capital, produces specific forms of occupational disadvantage.

H4. Age at arrival is a crucial factor: migrants arriving at a young age are more likely to enter the labour market quickly, thanks to a more effective acquisition of human capital specific to the Italian context.

3. Data and Methods

The analyses are based on data from the FOLCSI Survey (Italian acronym for "Formation, Employment, Care Work and Health of Immigrants and Persons with a Migratory Background in Italy"). The survey, that is based on a targeted and non-probabilistic sampling strategy, set up according to the Centre Sampling Method (Baio *et al*., 2011), involved 12,608 individuals with a migrant background. Out of these, 9,797 were first-generation immigrants aged 18 or older at the time of the interview, and they constitute the analytical sample used in this study. The sample includes immigrants with different legal statuses – regular, irregular, or awaiting regularisation. It was collected in 2024 in four Italian regions characterised by a significant portion of the foreign population in Italy and diverse socio-occupational contexts: Lombardy, Lazio, Campania, and Apulia.

The aim of the present study is to analyse the socio-demographic and migratory determinants that influence migrants' access to their first paid job in Italy. To this end, we employ binary logistic regression models, where the dependent variable is dichotomous: it takes value 1 if the individual obtained a first paid job after arrival in the country, and 0 otherwise.

Diverse socio-economic factors influence the likelihood of finding a first paid job in Italy. The independent variables included in the models are gender, age upon arrival, year of arrival, country of origin, reason for migration (economic, family, political, or other), migration intentions declared at the time of arrival (permanent vs. temporary/indefinite). Finally, education qualification and region of residence are included in the models as control variables. All explanatory variables were collected at the time of the interview, but referred to the time of arrival through retrospective questions, following methodological recommendations to avoid anticipatory bias (Hoem and Kreyenfeld, 2006; Mize *et al*., 2019; Long and Mustillo, 2021).

In order to address the issue of endogeneity, several tests were conducted by adding one variable at a time and carefully analysing changes in odds ratios. The first model includes only the variables referred at the moment of arrival in the host country (M1), the second introduces the level of education (M2), while the third also considers the region of residence, distinguishing between Lombardy, Lazio, Campania and Apulia (M3). The models are also estimated separately for men and women, with the aim of highlighting possible gender differences in access to first employment. This analytical approach makes it possible to assess in detail the impact of individual conditions observed exactly at the moment of arrival on first job placement, considering that the characteristics and motivations behind migration can differentially influence employment opportunities.

The final sample shows important differences regarding first job of migrants in Italy. A first overview of the data highlights substantial gender disparities in employment outcomes. Men represent the majority of the employed group (56.69%), whereas women are overrepresented among the non-employed (62.32%), suggesting a persistent gender gap in labour market integration. Age at arrival appears to play a critical role. Migrants who arrived between the ages of 18 and 29 show the highest employment rates (53.43%), while those who arrived after age 45 are markedly less likely to be employed, representing just 4.13%. Migration motives also distinguish individuals' employment trajectories. Those who reported economic reasons for migration are the most likely to be employed (52.09%). In contrast, migrants arriving for family reunification (38.44% of the non-employed), political reasons (20.48%), or other non-economic motivations (20.48%) show significantly lower employment outcomes. Migration intentions declared at the time of arrival also play a relevant role. Migrants with a non-permanent migration plan show higher share of employed individuals (36.54%) compared to those without a defined project (23.99%). Interestingly, their employment levels are also slightly higher than those of individuals with a declared permanent migration plan (39.46%), suggesting that short-term or flexible strategies may facilitate earlier entry into the labour market. Labour market access also varies by period of arrival. Migrants who arrived before 2010 show higher share of employed individuals, while those who arrived more recently (2017–2024) make up the largest share of the non-employed (60.25%), indicating greater difficulty in entering the labour market. Finally, considerable differences emerge by country of birth. Migrants from the Philippines, Romania, Perù, and other Eastern European countries display the most favourable share of employed individuals. Conversely, lower employment levels are observed among migrants from Pakistan, Egypt, and Southeast Asia. These disparities suggest persistent structural barriers linked to origin-based stratification in the Italian labour market.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the regression models and highlights the significant role of gender: women are much less likely to be employed compared to men. The odds of being employed are about 67% lower for women (OR = 0.33). Age at arrival also matters: compared to migrants aged 18–29, those arriving over the age of 45 have significantly lower employment odds (OR = 0.56). The period of arrival is negatively associated with employment: individuals who arrived between 2017 and 2024 are significantly more disadvantaged (OR = 0.19) compared to those who arrived before 1999. Reasons for migration strongly influence employment outcomes. Compared to those who migrated for economic reasons, individuals who arrived for family reunification (OR = 0.21), political reasons (OR = 0.31), or other reasons (OR = 0.22) are significantly less likely to obtain employment. Migration intentions declared at arrival show weaker effects. Migrants with a non-permanent project are slightly more likely to be employed than those with a permanent plan (OR = 1.16).

Country of origin remains a strong predictor of first labour market access. Compared to Albanian migrants (reference group), those from Romania (OR = 1.78), Eastern Europe (OR = 2.07), Philippines (OR = 2.83), Peru (OR = 3.60), and other Latin American countries (OR = 1.79) exhibit significantly higher employment odds. Conversely, migrants from Bangladesh (OR = 0.62), other Southeast Asian countries (OR = 0.43), and Egypt (OR = 0.47) experience greater difficulties in accessing work. Education is positively associated with employment. Migrants with lower secondary (OR = 1.30), upper secondary (OR = 1.57) and university education (OR = 2.32) all have higher odds of being employed compared to those with no education or only primary schooling. Finally, when regional controls are added in Model 3, no significant territorial differences emerge. Binary logistic regression models were estimated separately for men (Table 2) and women (Table 3) to explore gender-specific determinants of access to a first paid job.

Overall, several patterns are consistent across both groups. For both men and women, being over 45 at the time of arrival is associated with significantly lower employment likelihood, as arriving more recently (2017–2024). Migration for non-economic reasons (family or political) significantly reduces employment odds for both genders. This effect appears stronger among women, who are more frequently associated with family-related migration.

However, migration intentions show a gendered effect: among women, having a non-permanent migration plan is significantly associated with higher employment odds (OR = 1.46), whereas for men, no significant association is found for non-permanent plans, and the absence of a defined project is negatively associated with employment (OR = 0.76). Furthermore, differences by country of origin are more pronounced among women. While men from Peru (OR = 3.02) and the Philippines

(OR = 2.93) display high odds of being employed, the highest odds among women are observed for those from Romania (OR = 2.08) and other Eastern European countries (OR = 1.86). Conversely, women from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, and Southeast Asia face particularly strong disadvantages. Education remains a key predictor for both genders, especially for those with university degrees, although the effect is slightly stronger for women (OR = 2.67 vs. 1.86 for men).

Table 1 - *Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regression Models Predicting Access to a First Paid Job among Migrants.*

	M1	M2	M3
Variables	OR	OR	OR
Woman (Ref. Man)	0.35 ***	0.33***	0.33***
Over 45 (Ref. 18 – 29)	0.53 ***	0.56***	0.56***
From 2000 to 2009 (Ref. Arrival Until 1999)	1.14 **	1.14*	1.14**
From 2010 to 2016	0.76*	0.76*	0.76*
From 2017 to 2024	0.19***	0.19***	0.19***
Family reasons (Ref. Economic reasons)	0.22***	0.21***	0.21***
Political reasons	0.33***	0.32***	0.31***
Other reasons	0.27 ***	0.22***	0.22***
Non-permanent project (Ref. Permanent project)	1.27**	1.16*	1.16*
Romania (Ref. Albania)	1.71*	1.78*	1.78*
Other Eastern Europe	2.23**	2.10***	2.07***
Bangladesh	0.65*	0.66*	0.62*
Cina	1.62*	1.60*	1.57*
Philippines	3.05***	2.89***	2.83***
Other Southeast Asia	0.49*	0.43**	0.43**
Egypt	0.48***	0.46***	0.47***
Other Sub-Saharan Africa countries	1.16	1.39*	1.37*
Perù	3.85***	3.69***	3.6***
Other Central and Latin America countries	1.95***	1.83**	1.79**
Lower secondary education (Ref. No education and Primary)	-	1.30*	1.3**
Upper secondary and Post secondary	-	1.57***	1.57***
University education	-	2.32***	2.32***
Constant	*34.04*	*24.71*	*26.04*
-2 log likelihood	*3788.599*	*3731.8312*	*3730.4586*
Pseudo R^2	*0.2141*	*0.2206*	*0.2209*
N	*9,434*	*9,370*	*9,370*

*Source: Own elaboration on FOLCSI 2024 data. 95% confidence intervals shown. Significance levels: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.*

Table 2 – *Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regression Models Predicting Access to a First Paid Job among Migrant Men.*

	M1	M2	M3
Variables	OR	OR	OR
Over 45	0.37***	0.38***	0.37***
From 2000 to 2009 (Ref. Arrival Until 1999)	2.36**	2.44**	2.45**
From 2010 to 2016	1.81*	1.86*	1.89*
From 2017 to 2024	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***
Family reasons (Ref. Economic reasons)	0.47***	0.44***	0.44***
Political reasons	0.47***	0.46***	0.47***
Other reasons	0.29***	0.26***	0.26***
Non-permanent project (Ref. Permanent project)	0.98	0.86	0.86
No defined project	0.78*	0.76*	0.76*
Romania (Ref. Albania)	0.98	1.03	0.99
Other Eastern Europe	0.79	0.86	0.88
Bangladesh	1.91*	2.03*	2.15*
Cina	1.33	1.28	1.32
Philippines	3.04*	2.97*	2.93*
India	1.84	1.97*	2.01*
Pakistan	1.29	1.47	1.59
Other Southeast Asia countries	0.50	0.51	0.53
Egypt	1.46	1.53	1.50
Morocco	1.15	1.40	1.45
Other North African countries	1.68	1.94*	1.96*
Nigeria	0.94	1.14	1.17
Other Sub-Saharan Africa countries	1.38	1.73*	1.82*
Perù	3.17*	3.14*	3.02*
Other Central and Latin America countries	1.67	1.59	1.59
Lower secondary education (Ref. No education and Primary)	-	1.65***	1.60***
Upper secondary and Post secondary	-	1.78***	1.69***
University education	-	1.96***	1.86**
Constant	*20.87*	*13.36*	*11.18*
-2 log likelihood	*1578.4146*	*1548.8641*	*1546.5205*
Pseudo R²	*0.2073*	*0.2166*	*0.2178*
N	*4,921*	*4,888*	*4,888*

*Source: Own elaboration on FOLCSI 2024 data. 95% confidence intervals shown. Significance levels: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.*

Table 3 – *Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regression Models Predicting Access to a First Paid Job among Migrant Women.*

	M1	M2	M3
Variables	OR	OR	OR
Over 45	0.57***	0.62***	0.61***
From 2000 to 2009 (Ref. Arrival Until 1999)	0.88	0.88	0.88
From 2010 to 2016	0.57***	0.56***	0.57***
From 2017 to 2024	0.20***	0.21***	0.21***
Family reasons (Ref. Economic reasons)	0.23***	0.21***	0.21***
Political reasons	0.24***	0.22***	0.21***
Other reasons	0.28***	0.21***	0.21***
Non-permanent project (Ref. Permanent project)	1.56***	1.47***	1.46***
No defined project	1.30**	1.29**	1.29**
Romania (Ref. Albania)	1.91*	2.07*	2.08*
Other Eastern Europe	2.13***	1.90**	1.86**
Bangladesh	0.27***	0.26***	0.24***
Cina	1.57	1.57	1.53
Philippines	2.52**	2.30**	2.26**
India	0.50**	0.52**	0.52**
Pakistan	0.33**	0.33**	0.32**
Other Southeast Asia	0.58	0.47*	0.46*
Egypt	0.23***	0.21***	0.22***
Morocco	0.65	0.72	0.73
Other North African countries	0.82	0.85	0.83
Nigeria	0.51**	0.64	0.63
Other Sub-Saharan Africa countries	1.38	1.70*	1.66*
Perù	3.64***	3.48***	3.40***
Other Central and Latin America countries	2.02**	1.91**	1.87**
Lower secondary education (Ref. No education and Primary)	-	1.06	1.06
Upper secondary and Post secondary	-	1.52***	1.53***
University education	-	2.66***	2.67***
Constant	*13.36*	*9.81*	*10.66*
-2 log likelihood	*4125.7394*	*4043.7622*	*4038.3254*
Pseudo R²	*0.2313*	*0.2415*	*0.2426*
N	*4,512*	*4,481*	*4,481*

*Source: Own elaboration on FOLCSI 2024 data. 95% confidence intervals shown. Significance levels: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.*

5. Conclusions and future steps

The results of this study confirm that the likelihood of obtaining a first paid job in Italy is strongly influenced by individual and migratory characteristics measured at the time of arrival. In line with the literature (Ambrosini, 2013; Ballarino and Panichella, 2015; Impicciatore and Molinari, 2025), the results show that gender, migration motives, and country of origin are key axes of stratification that generate significant disparities in early integration into the labor market. In particular, migrants from different origins show divergent patterns, with non-EU citizens facing greater disadvantages in accessing employment. Moreover, education level emerges as an important predictor, as higher qualifications are positively associated with the likelihood of being employed.

In particular, the results support our first hypothesis (H1), showing that migrants who arrived for economic reasons are more likely to obtain early employment than those who migrated for family reunification or humanitarian protection. This finding reflects a stronger labour market orientation and a more favourable self-selection in terms of employability (Impicciatore and Molinari, 2025). The second hypothesis (H2) is only partially supported. While migration intentions declared upon arrival are significantly associated with access to first paid employment, the effect is in the opposite direction than expected. Individuals with non-permanent migration plans show higher odds of employment, particularly among women. This suggests that short-term migration projects often involve prioritising rapid labour market entry, even in precarious or low-quality jobs, over long-term integration strategies (Ambrosini, 2013). The third hypothesis (H3), concerning the gendered patterns of early employment, is confirmed as well. Migrant women, especially those from non-European countries or with low-recognition qualifications, show significantly lower employment odds than their male counterparts, highlighting persistent gender-based inequalities shaped by origin and human capital interaction (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011; Cantalini *et al*., 2023). Finally, our fourth hypothesis (H4) is corroborated: age at arrival appears to be a crucial determinant of access to employment, with younger migrants more likely to integrate rapidly due to greater capacity to accumulate country-specific human capital (Dustmann *et al*., 2016).

However, some limitations should be addressed in future analyses. First, while our models take into account several variables measured at arrival, it would be useful to include family-related factors, such as marital status or number of children. Although not measurable retrospectively, an indicator can be derived by combining current characteristics with the declared reference year (Impicciatore and Molinari, 2025). Second, future research should take into account language skills at the time of arrival, which can be inferred from current reported skills, as language barriers are likely to play a key role in determining access to job opportunities (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014; Colombo and Dalla Zuanna, 2019).

Further analyses should also consider employment not only as a binary outcome, but by distinguishing between types of jobs, sectors, and quality of employment. This would allow for a better understanding of occupational segmentation, particularly among overqualified migrants (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011; Cantalini *et al*., 2023). In addition, the length of stay in the host country and the time needed to access the first paid job should be analyzed in more detail. Estimating the time between arrival and entry into the labor market, particularly in relation to migration motives and gender, can provide crucial insights into how structural constraints delay labor market participation. Such delays can produce cumulative disadvantages over time, particularly for women and humanitarian migrants (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014; Ballarino and Panichella, 2015; Impicciatore and Molinari, 2025). Finally, estimating gender-stratified expected employment likelihood may help clarify whether the observed disadvantages stem from individual preferences, systemic barriers, or their interaction (Avola, 2015; Fellini *et al*., 2023).

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