LABOUR MARKET TRAJECTORIES AND GENDER DISPARITIES AMONG IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ITALY AND SPAIN

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Abstract. In recent decades, Southern European Countries, such as Italy and Spain, became destinations where immigrants have had permanent settlement patterns, including family reunification and formation. As a result, these countries now face the dual challenge of integrating first-generation immigrants and supporting the labour market inclusion of their children. This study examines gender and generational inequalities in labour market outcomes using 2021 EU-LFS data. The analysis focuses on young adults, distinguishing between natives, first-generation immigrants, and the children of immigrants. Particular attention is given to access to high-skilled employment and to gender disparities within and between origin groups. The results reveal both similarities and differences between the Italian and Spanish contexts. In Italy, access to high-skilled careers varies by migrant generation, with significant differences also based on gender, revealing a double disadvantage linked to both migration background and gender. In Spain, children of immigrants do not show major labour market gaps, and gender disparities are less marked, although first-generation immigrant women remain disadvantaged. These findings highlight how national context and gender intersect to shape labour market integration across generations.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, Europe has experienced significant shifts in immigration flows and Southern European Countries faced new and complex challenges. Among them, Italy and Spain have seen a large rise in the numbers of foreign-born residents, particularly since the late 1990s (Bonifazi and Strozza, 2017). Characterized at the beginning by temporary and often irregular labour migration, these inflows have gradually transitioned into more permanent settlement patterns, including family reunification and formation with new births. These countries are no longer only managing the labour market integration of first-generation immigrants but also facing the emerging challenges and opportunities associated with the insertion of their descendants. While research on immigrant integration across Western Europe is studied form long time, comparatively little attention has been placed on the labour market paths of the children of immigrants in newer receiving countries like Spain and Italy. Although first and second-generation immigrants share common structural barriers, such as ethnic penalty and limited social capital, their labour market

experiences and opportunities can diverge significantly, especially when accounting for age at arrival (Adsera and Chiswick, 2007). In addition to the barriers they face in the labour market, such as limited access to high skilled careers, gender inequality adds another layer of disadvantage. Immigrant women often experience a double burden, facing both gender and ethnic penalty. This article examines labour market gaps between natives and individuals with a migration background in Italy and Spain looking at gender dynamics. We use microdata from the 2021 European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS). We differentiate between four generational categories: natives, first-generation migrants, descendants and children of migrants. The objective is twofold: to examine whether access to high skilled or, alternatively, low skilled careers differ by migrant generation in the two countries, and to assess the extent to which gender and ethnic background influence this access.

2. Theoretical background

While in Central and Northern European Countries research on the labour market integration of immigrants' descendants is well developed (Crul and Schneider 2009; Heath *et al*, 2008), in countries where the children of immigrants are mostly still in school age, studies on their labour market situation remain limited (Achouche, 2025; Muñoz-Comet and Arcarons, 2021). So far, academic research on the descendants of migrant in Southern European Countries has mainly focused on children and adolescents (Azzolini *et al*., 2012). Recently, as second-generations are becoming more numerous in adult age groups, their transition to adulthood is increasingly being studied in these two countries (Portes *et al*, 2018; Buonomo *et al*, 2025; Di Bello *et al*, 2025). Focusing on children of immigrants, scholars, examining longer-established migration contexts in Western Europe, have noted that, even in cases of successful integration, significant differences persist according to country of origin and age at arrival (Crul *et al*, 2016).

Early arrival in the destination country is generally associated with better language acquisition, cultural assimilation, and educational continuity, all of which increase the chances of achieving similar native-born counterpart's occupational outcomes (Fajth and Lessard-Phillips, 2022; Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2021).

Studies have consistently shown that individuals with a migrant background face significant barriers when entering the labour market (Li and Heath, 2020). Labor market integration pathways in Europe vary significantly among different origin groups, with considerable discrepancies across countries (Fellini, 2018). Some scholars following the downward assimilation hypothesis claim that immigrant descendants face more demanding pathways to employment, especially about well-paid jobs (Drouhot and Nee, 2019), while others adhere the upward assimilation hypothesis think the existing gap is steadily declining (Alba and Foner, 2015). Gorodzeisky and Semyonov (2017) confirm the classical assimilation model for men

and women of second-generation, finding no disadvantages in accessing high skill jobs compared to natives; while origin appears to matter more for the first-generation being disadvantaged compared to natives. Other studies in Europe, as Palencia-Esteban (2022), shows that although outcomes improve compared to the first-generation, second-generation individuals still display a marked gender divide, with women more frequently employed in less qualified positions. The comparative work by Lelie, Crul and Schneider (2012) further confirms that the integration context shapes the trajectories of second-generation men and women differently, also depending on their ethnic origin, highlighting how young women continue to face specific barriers in accessing qualified professional pathways.

Southern European Countries such as Italy and Spain are characterised by more accessible labour markets, where formal entry is relatively easier but often restricted to low-skilled and highly segregated sectors (Cantalini *et al*, 2022a). This structural segmentation results in stagnation or limited upward mobility for many immigrants, who remain trapped in precarious jobs with few opportunities for advancement (Cachón Rodríguez, 2022; Bayona-i-Carrasco and Domingo, 2024).

In Italy immigrants are disproportionately concentrated in agricultural labour, construction, and care sector, particularly in elderly and domestic care (Avola, 2022). Generally speaking, they are concentrated in sectors marked by precarious and informal work, often facing challenges related to legal status and bureaucratic barriers (Meardi, 2024). In Spain, a large share of foreign workers is employed in low-skilled sectors, these are primarily agriculture, food service, construction sector, and domestic care (SEPE, 2023).

Italy is characterised by a mosaic of ethnic origin arriving from Eastern Europe, South Asia, and North Africa (Zanfrini and Pasini, 2024); Spain shows a different pattern, with a higher presence of migrants from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (ECP, 2024). Highlighting origins is important, as some ethnic communities, compared to others, experience ethnic penalties, meaning they encounter greater disadvantages in labour market access and advancing career (Midtbøen, 2015).

In both countries, immigrants face not only challenges in accessing more skilled and stable occupations but also significant gender disparities. The gendered nature of employment is also shaped by community background (Martini, 2024). Domestic and care work is highly feminised and often associated with specific nationalities, for instance: in Italy, many women employed in these sectors come from the Philippines and Eastern Europe, while in Spain, Latin American women are predominant (Schroot, 2025). This gender and ethnic segregation in Southern European Countries results in a double penalty for women, leading to greater difficulties in accessing high-skilled career paths (Cantalini *et al*, 2022b).

We hypothesise, following segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou, 1993), that immigrants' descendants born in the destination country have higher

chances of obtaining high skilled jobs compared to first-generation immigrants, with outcomes similar but lower compared to natives. Our second hypothesis is that clear gender differences emerge in access to skilled jobs, gender gaps vary across migrant generations with descendants showing smaller gender disparities than the first-generation. In addition, we further analyse how gender and ethnic origin may mitigate or aggravate the chances of accessing both high skilled and low skilled career pathways.

3. Data and Methods

This study is based on microdata from the 2021 EU-LFS, using the *ad hoc module* on "Working conditions of immigrants and their immediate descendants", which oversampling population with migratory background, enabling accurate comparisons among European Countries. The selected sample includes individuals aged 15 to 35 at the time of the survey. This age range captures the early stages of labour market participation, which are particularly relevant for second-generation, who are still relatively young in Italy and Spain. The analytical sample consists of approximately 38.332 observations for Italy and for Spain. This sample is reduced for the analysis because we considered only individuals that at the time of the survey was employed, obtaining 8.300 observations for Italy and 6.503 for Spain. In descriptive analyses, we used the weighted system provided by EU-LFS to make our results representative of the observed universe. For both countries, individuals were classified into four generational categories, namely: "natives" are those born in the country with two native-born parents; "descendants" include those born in the host country or who arrived before the age of 6, with at least one foreign-born parent; "children of immigrants" are individuals born abroad and arrived between the ages of 6 and 17; "first-generation" are those who migrated at the age of 18 or older.

In both Italy and Spain, the sample is predominantly composed of natives, 80% in Italy and 84% in Spain, followed by descendants (6% in Italy, 5% in Spain), children of immigrants (4% in both countries), and first-generation immigrants (10% in Italy and 7% in Spain). We estimate four multinomial logistic regression models with the current occupational status as the dependent variable, based on ISCO 1 digit: high-skilled (digits 1-3), medium-skilled (digits 4-7; reference category), and low-skilled jobs (digits 8-9), excluding the armed force workers (digit 0).

The models are estimate separately for Spain and Italy. In the first set of models, we consider the interaction of gender and generational categories as target independent variable, controlling for age, educational level, and continent of origin. In the second set of models, only results for the first-generation are shown, we consider the interaction of gender, generational categories, and continent of origin as target independent variable. We use continent of birth as a proxy for ethnic origin. For descendants born in the country under study, we assign the foreign origin of the

parent. The origins considered are Central-South America (10.74% in Italy; 53.08% in Spain), the EU and other more developed countries (34.99% in Italy; 24.97% in Spain), other European countries (21.96% in Italy; 5.60% in Spain), Africa (14.80% in Italy; 11.48% in Spain), and Asia (17.50% in Italy; 4.88% in Spain).

4. Results

In terms of occupational structure, high-skilled workers represent 32.63% of the labour force in Italy and 34.14% in Spain. Medium-skilled jobs account for 56.83% in Italy and 54.05% in Spain, while low-skilled occupations make up 10.54% of the labour force in Italy and 11.81% in Spain. In Figure 1, we show the distribution of labour market skills by migrant generation and gender in Italy and Spain. Among natives in both countries, we observe a quite balanced gender distribution in high-skilled employment, though women have higher percentages than men. In Spain, the percentage of high-skilled workers for descendants are like the one observed for natives, while it decreases drastically for children of immigrants. In Italy, we observe a decreasing trend in high skilled job among young adult by migration generation.

Figure 1 – *Percentages of workers by skill level, generational categories and gender. Italy and Spain.*
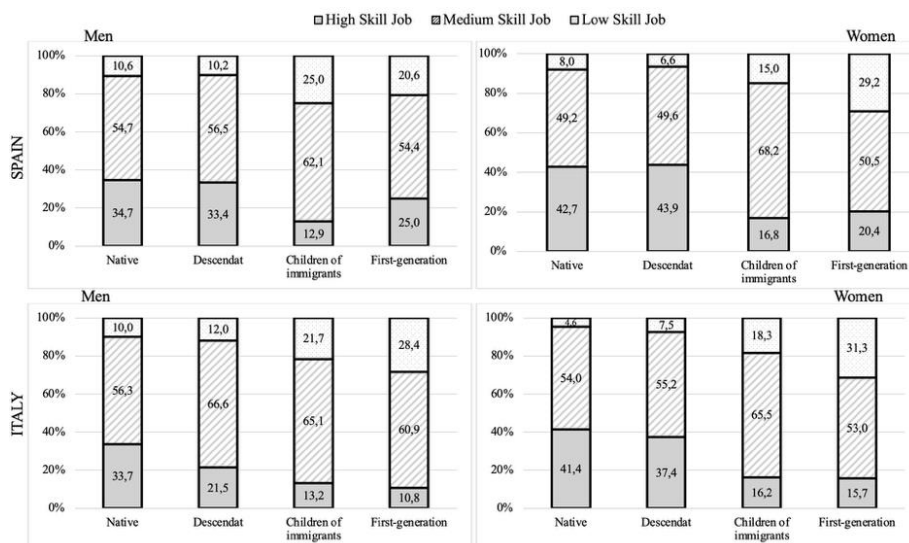
Source: our elaboration on EU-LFS 2021 data

Particularly notable difference appears among first-generation immigrants: in Spain, 25% of men and 20% of women in this group are employed in high-skilled

sectors; in Italy the same percentages are significantly lower (10,8% and 15,7% respectively). When it comes to low-skilled jobs, the pictures are more similar between countries, with few exceptions. Across all generational categories, men tend to be more employed in low-skilled jobs than women, with natives and descendants showing the lowest percentages. However, among first-generation immigrants, women are more likely than men to work in low-skilled sectors.

The picture in Italy and Spain is somehow different from the observed descriptive outcome (Table 1).

Table 1 – *Odd ratios of interaction of generational categories and gender in two multinomial logistic regression model which consider 'medium-skilled job' as the reference category, and high-skilled and low-skilled job as outcomes. Italy and Spain.*

Generational categories	Gender	High-skilled job				Low-skilled job			
		Odd r.	p.value	int.95%		Odd r.	p.value	int.95%	
Italy									
Natives	Men (*ref.*)	1.000				1.000			
	Women	0.651	0.000	0.572	0.742	0.524	0.000	0.424	0.649
Descendants	Men	0.769	0.164	0.530	1.110	0.894	0.603	0.586	1.363
	Women	0.486	0.000	0.324	0.729	0.555	0.075	0.290	1.006
Children of immigrants	Men	0.444	0.003	0.260	0.760	1.300	0.220	0.855	1.977
	Women	0.463	0.008	0.261	0.820	0.884	0.662	0.510	1.533
First-generation	Men	0.269	0.000	0.172	0.421	1.586	0.007	1.136	2.213
	Women	0.289	0.000	0.182	0.456	2.693	0.000	1.914	3.791
Constant term		0.102				0.346			
Spain									
Natives	Men (*ref.*)	1.000				1.000			
	Women	1.049	0.476	0.919	1.198	0.982	0.850	0.810	1.189
Descendants	Men	1.050	0.836	0.659	1.673	0.478	0.016	0.262	0.872
	Women	1.218	0.412	0.760	1.953	0.386	0.025	0.168	0.890
Children of immigrants	Men	0.932	0.838	0.476	1.827	0.744	0.323	0.414	1.338
	Women	0.555	0.082	0.286	1.077	0.752	0.384	0.396	1.428
First-generation	Men	1.053	0.843	0.629	1.764	1.467	0.144	0.877	2.456
	Women	0.594	0.038	0.364	0.971	2.655	0.000	1.649	4.276
Constant term		0.067				0.466			

Notes: for Italy Pseudo R2: 0.207; Number of obs.: 8,300; Number of non-natives 1.660. For Spain Pseudo R2: 0.198; Number of obs.: 6.503; Number of non-natives 1.040. Control variables: age, educational level, continent of origin. Source: our elaboration on EU-LFS 2021 data.

In Italy, native women are significantly less likely than native men to be employed in high-skill jobs (odd ratio equals to 0.651). Men with a migrant

background, especially first-generation, face clear disadvantages. Both children of immigrants and first-generation (men and women) show significantly lower odd ratios of being employed in high-skilled jobs compared to native men. Male descendants do not show significant differences from native men, while female descendants have a significant negative odd ratio (0.486). Overall, we can argue that all generational categories, with one exception, are disadvantaged in accessing high skilled jobs compared to native men.

Regarding low-skill employment, the model reveals that female natives and descendants, almost with a significant p-value, have a negative odd ratio (0.524 and 0.555) with a statistically significant tendency not to be in low-skilled jobs. The opposite occurs for first-generation who are significantly more likely to be in low-skill jobs relative to medium-skill jobs, with a higher gradient for women (2.693) than for men (1.586).

The model for Spain highlights few adding disparities in occupational outcomes by generational categories and gender. In the case of high-skilled jobs, the female first-generation emerges as the only category with a statistically significant disadvantaged position compared to native men (0.594). This result is the same observed in Italy for this category. All other odd ratios, are not statistically significant, suggesting no clear difference in the access to high-skill jobs across these generational categories. In line with the Italian case, first-generation (significantly only for women) are more likely to be in low-skill jobs relative to medium-skill jobs, with a higher gradient for women (2.655) than for men (1.467). Not in line with the Italian case, men and women descendants show negative odds of being employed in low-skill jobs rather than medium-skill ones (0.478 for men and 0.386 for women). This does not occur among natives who do not show statistically different gender disparities

Table 2 presents the results, for the first-generation, of two multinomial logistic regression models in Italy and Spain, considering native men as reference category, with a further interaction of generational categories, gender and continent of origin. In our analysis, we considered all migrant generations (available on request); however, we focus on the most relevant results for first-generation immigrants, as the interaction terms did not reveal substantial effects for descendants and children of immigrants. This suggests that the double ethnic penalty is less pronounced for descendants and children of immigrants compared to the first-generation.

Table 2 – *Odd ratios of first-generation, interaction with gender and continent of origin, with reference category native men, in two multinomial logistic regression models as outcomes high-skilled and low-skilled job, considering 'medium-skilled job' as reference category. Italy and Spain.*

		Italy				Spain			
		High Skill job		Low skill job		High Skill job		Low skill job	
	Native men (*ref.*)	Odd r.	p.value	Odd r.	p.value	Odd r.	p.value	Odd r.	p.value
Men	More devel. Country	0.277	0.001	1.598	0.050	1.232	0.614	1.170	0.738
	Africa	0.433	0.042	3.470	0.000	0.313	0.300	4.095	0.001
	Asia	0.435	0.010	2.539	0.000	0.230	0.198	0.330	0.294
	Central-South America	0.474	0.137	1.351	0.488	0.756	0.314	2.307	0.000
	Other non-EU Europe	0.217	0.000	1.082	0.772	1.639	0.573	2.060	0.549
Women	More devel. Country	0.386	0.003	2.646	0.000	1.418	0.346	3.877	0.000
	Africa	0.060	0.009	3.160	0.001	0.966	0.968	7.181	0.000
	Asia	0.359	0.091	2.484	0.012	0.946	0.944	2.959	0.367
	Central-South America	0.520	0.210	4.336	0.000	0.220	0.000	3.437	0.000
	Other non-EU Europe	0.252	0.000	3.993	0.000	0.630	0.557	2,970	0.210

Notes: For Italy Pseudo R2: 0.2111, Number of obs.: 8,300; Number of non-natives 1.660. For Spain Pseudo R2: 0.2017, Number of obs.: 6.503; Number of non-natives 1.040. Control variables: age, educational level. Source: our elaboration on EU-LFS 2021 data.

In Italy, first-generation migrants, especially women and those from no Western Country face strong ethnic penalties in the labour market. Among men for Africa and Asian disadvantage are pronounced from native men, while men from Other Europe show the lowest odds of accessing high skill work. For first-generation women in Italy, the labour market exclusion is even more marked, with all women showing a high likelihood of being employed in low-skill jobs. African women have extremely low odds of working in high skill occupations (0.060) and high odds of being employed in low skill jobs (3.160).

In Spain, the exclusion from high skill employment is less evident. Among first-generation men, none of the origin for high skill jobs are statistically significant, suggesting a relatively more equitable access, while for low skill job African men have higher penalization (4.095), followed by those from Central-South America (2.307). Among women in Spain, significant ethnic penalties emerge mainly in low skill jobs. African women exhibit the highest likelihood of low skill employment (7.181), followed by women from Central-South America and More Developed Countries. In Spain, while barriers persist, particularly for low skill employment, access to high skill positions appears less restricted by origin, suggesting that may language can help those with Spanish roots facilitating their integration.

5. Conclusions

The results partially confirm the first hypothesis. In Italy, male descendants of immigrants show a likelihood to high-skilled jobs comparable to that of natives, whereas female descendants remain significantly disadvantaged. Also in Spain, differences between natives and descendants appear not significant for both genders, suggesting a more inclusive labour market context. However, caution is needed when interpreting these findings, particularly for Spain, where the limited sample size of descendants and children of immigrants may have reduced the statistical power to detect disparities, rather than indicating actual equality.

Our second hypothesis is only partially confirmed. Among first-generation immigrants, the gender gap is more pronounced, and this pattern holds in both countries. Among descendants, the gap does not disappear everywhere: in Italy, descendant women continue to face a significant disadvantage in accessing skilled jobs, whereas in Spain gender differences are not statistically significant. Overall, gender disparities are greater in the first generation, especially when our analysis simultaneously accounts for ethnic origin and includes both descendants and children of migrants. First-generation women have a significantly higher likelihood of being employed in low-skilled jobs. This disadvantage is particularly marked in Italy and reflects both labour-market segmentation and existing gender inequalities. By contrast, in Spain, higher levels of female emancipation and labour-force participation appear to contribute to a relatively less penalising context for first-generation women.

The limited sample size of the descendants and children of migrant, due to the still relatively small number of young adults in these generations, particularly in the Spanish case, reduces the robustness of the estimates for these subgroups. For this reason, we considered individuals with mixed parentage, the use of cross-sectional data does not allow for the observation of employment trajectories over time. It is therefore not possible to assess whether, and to what extent, skills and experiences acquired during one's career improve access to higher-skilled occupations. The ages range considered (15–35 years) captures only the early stages of working life, without providing information on long-term job stability, mobility, or occupational transitions. Lastly, due to the limited information of the sample, we are unable to identify specific ethnic communities. As a result, we rely on aggregated categories based on continent of origin, which may obscure important heterogeneities within and between migrant generation and gender outcomes. Despite the limitations, this study takes advantage of the 2021 EU-LFS, which for the first time allows for the analysis of descendants' labour market outcomes in Spain and Italy, and offers a new lens through which to interpret the phenomenon.

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