EMPLOYMENT AND LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN ITALY: EVIDENCE FROM THE ITRAS SURVEY[1]

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Abstract. Employment plays a crucial role in promoting integration by providing autonomy and stability – factors especially critical for forcibly displaced individuals. It is also positively linked to overall life satisfaction. This study, drawing on data from the first Italian Refugees and Asylum seekers Survey, explores their life satisfaction, examining its relationship with employment outcomes and their structural barriers and socio-economic supports through a mediation model. The analysis reveals that employment outcomes are significantly and positively associated with life satisfaction. In contrast, poor health, low Italian language proficiency, and a lack of local social support networks are negatively associated with well-being, while the presence of a family network in Italy and receiving subsidies are positively related. Moreover, employment outcomes mediate the effects of most barriers and facilitators on life satisfaction. These results provide a contextualization of the Italian territory of refugees and asylum seekers' life satisfaction.

1. Introduction

The last available UNHCR data (UNHCR, 2025) indicate a growing number of asylum applications in Italy in 2024, with an estimated 306,908 refugees and 180,062 asylum seekers – representing an annual increase of 2.9% and 22.6%, respectively – despite the country's stricter migration policies. While initial efforts focused mainly on emergency reception and basic needs, Italy has gradually developed targeted programs aimed at fostering the social and economic integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

A relevant component of the measurement of integration focuses on individuals' subjective well-being, particularly through self-reported life satisfaction (e.g., Colic-Peisker, 2009; Khawaja and Hebbani, 2019; Pollenne, 2024).

Life satisfaction is generally defined as an overall cognitive assessment that individuals make of their own life, taking into account all relevant aspects (Diener

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et al., 1985). It is therefore a measure of evaluative well-being that reflects not only internal dispositions and stable personality traits but also subjective interpretations of life events and changes in external living conditions (Pavot and Diener, 2008). The subjective nature of such assessment is particularly relevant, as it allows individuals to assign different weights to various life domains according to their personal experience.

The literature has identified a number of life domains that contribute to overall satisfaction, including social and family relationships, health status, housing situation, community participation, and employment (Brucker *et al.*, 2017; Jebb *et al.*, 2020, ONS, 2025). Recent studies (Ambrosetti *et al.*, 2021; Pollene, 2024) suggest that for refugees and asylum seekers as well, LS is conceptualized similarly to the general population – as a kind of balance between the different domains considered significant to one's life. However, experiences of forced displacement and marginalization may influence the relative importance assigned to these domains.

Within this general framework, the present contribution aims to explore the relationship between life satisfaction (LS) and employment outcomes (EO) among asylum seekers and refugees in Italy, using a novel survey (the ItRAS survey introduced in the following).

Among the life domains, employment is identified as a key dimension for the subjective well-being of refugees and asylum seekers in host countries in several studies (e.g., Ambrosetti and Paparusso, 2021; Haindorferer *et al.*, 2024), as it is not only a means of achieving economic independence and stability, but also a fundamental channel for social inclusion, identity construction, and public recognition within the host society. Employment, thus, holds multiple meanings: at the individual level, it provides autonomy, routine and a sense of accomplishment; at the societal level, it contributes to the community's social cohesion and strengthens its economic and cultural fabric (Lee *et al.*, 2020; Ager and Strang, 2008).

However, mere participation in the labour market is not sufficient to grant refugees and asylum seekers integration. Access to formal and legally recognized employment is crucial for securing rights, social protection, and prospects for effective long-term settlement and social inclusion.

The literature identifies two main factors shaping attachment to the labor market: on the one hand, systemic barriers that hinder labour market entry, and on the other, socio-economic support mechanisms aimed at facilitating it. These operate across multiple levels: individual, organizational, and institutional. At the individual level, language skills, educational background, and social support networks are essential for accessing the local labour market; yet these personal resources often clash with structural barriers such as discriminatory hiring practices, non-recognition of foreign

qualifications, and exclusion from professional networks. Even when employed, refugees may find themselves confined to precarious and low-skilled jobs, with limited opportunities for upward mobility. Contextual factors – such as labour market policies, welfare systems, and public attitudes toward migrants – also play a critical role in shaping employment opportunities (Ortensi, 2015; Zetter and Ruaudel, 2016).

Building on this evidence, this study aims to test a model linking refugees' life satisfaction to employment outcomes and explores whether employment plays a mediating role in the effects of individual, social, and structural barriers and facilitators to integration.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 presents the data, outlines the theoretical framework, and describes the methodological approach. Section 3 reports the main findings and provides a discussion of the results. The paper concludes with a summary of key insights and implications in the final section.

2. Data and Methods

This section provides a brief overview of the ItRAS survey, which forms the empirical basis of this study, as well as the theoretical model employed to examine the relationship between employment outcomes and life satisfaction among refugees and asylum seekers in Italy.

2.1. Sample

The ItRAS, the Italian Refugees and Asylum Seeker Survey, is the first statistical survey in Italy covering the population of asylum seekers and refuges; it was conducted within the PRIN2022 project AVRAI -Assessing the Vulnerability of Refugees and Asylum-seekers in Italy- which investigates various aspects of the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the country.

The survey, which included 1,327 beneficiaries of international protection and those with a pending application for asylum, selected by means of a centre sampling technique (Baio *et al*., 2011), was carried out between March and August 2024 through face-to-face interviews. The interviews took place in 66 Italian cities, spread in the North, Center, South, and the islands, covering urban areas of different sizes, home to (or nearby) territorial commissions responsible for granting asylum. ItRAS includes people of 67 different nationalities.

Despite an intended oversampling of women, the sample is predominantly composed of men (59%), with an average age of about 34 years (SD = 10.35). Most participants have a recognised status of legal protection, as 63% are refugees or
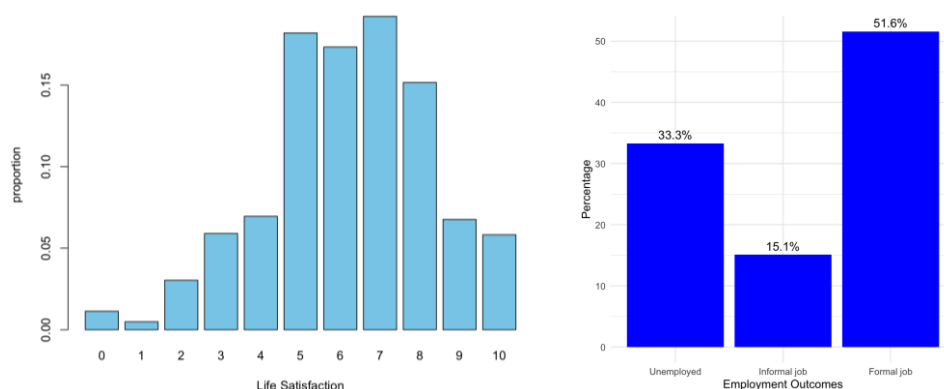
individuals granted other forms of international protection, while 37% are asylum seekers. The average length of stay is 5.29 years (SD = 3.74), given eligibility criteria set the oldest entry year in 2011 and the most recent at 6 months before the interview. Their educational level is generally high (47% have at least a high-school diploma or higher title), and they reside mainly in Northern Italy (39%), followed by Central (33%) and Southern Italy (27%).

2.2. *The theoretical model and its operationalization*

The key variables in this study are two: life satisfaction and employment outcomes. The first is operationalised via an eleven-point Likert scale measuring respondents' self-assessed life satisfaction. The second captures individuals' employment outcomes, classifying them into three distinct categories: (1) unemployed (i.e., not receiving any labour-related income), (2) informally employed (i.e., engaged in work without the protections offered by a formal contract), and (3) formally employed (i.e., working under a formal contract, which may not necessarily cover all working hours). This latter variable is ordinal, reflecting an increasing gradient of labour rights and entitlements.

The two percentage distributions are shown in Figure 1. Overall, asylum seekers and refugees report moderate to high levels of life satisfaction (see Figure 1), while just over half of the respondents declare to be formally employed (51.6%), and one in three declare to be unemployed.

Figure 1 – *Percentage distribution of Life Satisfaction (left) and Employment Outcomes (right).*
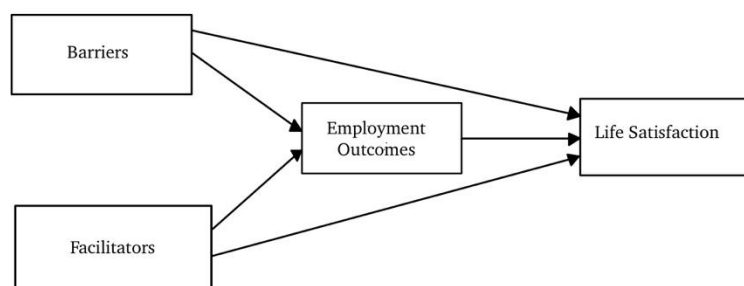

Note: Elaborations on ItRAS data using sampling weights.

Barriers and facilitators to integration play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between LS and EO. In this study, barriers are operationalized through variables capturing poor language proficiency (dummy), and a poor health status (dummy), while facilitators are measured using variables such as receiving economic subsides[2] and access to social support networks (particularly, number of Italian friends, and two dummies for presence of relatives in Italy and having non-Italian friends).

The proposed theoretical model also posits a mediated framework in which EO serves as an intermediary variable linking structural barriers and facilitators to refugees' overall life satisfaction.

Within this framework, employment is intended not only as a meaningful outcome in its own right but also as a critical pathway through which broader migration-related push and pull factors influence subjective well-being (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 - *Theoretical mediation model of the relationship between Employment Outcomes and Life satisfaction.*

Note: This model also includes two sets of control variables for EO and LS.

Particularly, we aim to test the following three research hypotheses:

RH1: Barriers and facilitators act directly on LS, i.e. barriers lower LS and facilitators foster high levels of LS;
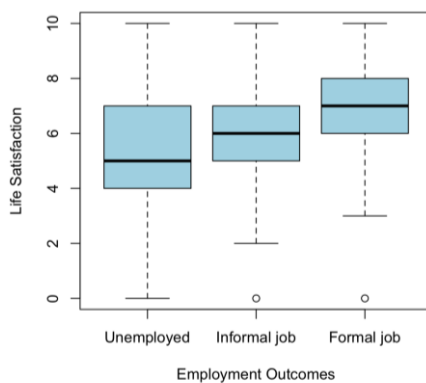
RH2: EO have a direct effect on the LS of refugees and asylum seekers: a (better) entrance into the labor market fosters higher levels of LS;

[2.] For respondents receiving subsidies, the survey inquired about the extent to which their standard of living depended on the received support. Answers were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Very much" to "Not at all." High dependence includes those who selected "Very much" or "Fairly," while low dependence encompasses responses such as "Would be the same," "A little," and "Not at all."

RH3: EO act as a mediator between barriers and facilitators and the LS of refugees and asylum seekers: barriers lower LS also through their negative effect on EO, while Facilitators increase LS through their positive effect on EO.

Figure 3 provides first insights into the main relationship of interest, i.e., the one between EO and LS, showing how individuals with greater employment protection tend to exhibit higher levels of life satisfaction.

Figure 3 – *Box-plots for Life Satisfaction by level of Employment Outcomes.*

Note: elaborations based in ItRAS using sampling weights.

To test the proposed model, we used a path analysis model in which two regression equations express the mediated relationship between life satisfaction and barriers and facilitators of integration to labour market outcomes. The model includes other control variables both of EO and LS (i.e., age, sex, length of stay in Italy, educational level, nationality grouped by continent of origin, residence grouped in Northern, Central and Southern Italy). Furthermore, for LS we also introduced among controls a variable of relatedness (measuring appreciation for how Italian people work) and a dummy for living alone.
The two equations in the model are:

$$EO = \sum_{j=1}^{2} \alpha_j x_j + \sum_{i=1}^{4} \tau_i m_i + \sum_{k=1}^{6} \gamma_k z_k \tag{1}$$

$$LS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EO + \sum_{j=1}^{2} \delta_j x_j + \sum_{i=1}^{4} \varphi_i m_i + \sum_{l=1}^{8} \lambda_l n_l \tag{2}$$

in which the set of coefficients $\alpha_j, \tau_i, \gamma_k, \delta_j, \varphi_i, \lambda_l$ as well as β_0, β_1 are the coefficients of the direct effects in the two equations (α_j and δ_j for barriers; τ_i and φ_i

for facilitators; γ_k and λ_l for control variables) and x_j are barriers variables, m_i are facilitator variables, z_k and n_l are the two sets of variables used as controls. The indirect and total effects of the mediation model can be expressed as follows:

$$ind_j = \beta_1 \alpha_j, j = 1,2 \text{ and } ind_i = \beta_1 \tau_i, i = 1, ..., 4 \tag{3}$$

$$tot_j = ind_j + \delta_j, j = 1,2 \text{ and } tot_i = ind_i + \varphi_i, i = 1, ..., 4 \tag{4}$$

Given the ordinal nature of the response variable in equation (1), a multivariate probit model was estimated, whereas the model in equation (2) is a linear regression model. The analyses were conducted using R version 4.4.2 (R Core Team, 2024) and the *lavaan* package version 0.6-19 (Rosseel, 2012).

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the results presented in Tables 1 and 2, it is possible to outline a nuanced picture of the relationships between barriers and facilitators of employment outcomes and life satisfaction, within a model that also hypothesizes indirect effects mediated by EO.

Among the factors showing a significant influence on both dependent variables (EO and LS), poor knowledge of the Italian language stands out in particular, showing a negative effect both on EO ($\alpha = -0.518$, p < .001) and on LS ($\delta = -0.842$, p < .001). This suggests that individuals with limited Italian language proficiency perceive greater difficulties in finding a regular job, which in turn translates into lower subjective well-being.

Poor health status also appears to be a critical factor, as it is negatively associated with both outcomes ($\alpha = -0.599$ for EO and $\delta = -0.621$ for LS), consistent with the hypothesis that poor health conditions constitute a significant barrier to both labour market participation and well-being.

The number of Italian friends is marginally significant in explaining EO (p = 0.062) while it shows a more substantial positive effect on LS ($\delta = 0.082$, p < .001), suggesting that social ties with members of the host society may foster a sense of overall well-being, (e.g., by diminishing the perception of discrimination, Fozdar and Torezani, 2008) even if it does not necessarily translate into direct employment benefits. Similarly, having relatives in Italy does not appear to influence EO but has, as expected, a positive effect on LS ($\alpha = 0.482$, p = 0.002), likely due to the received social and emotional support (Khawaja and Hebbani, 2019). Having non-Italian friends is not statistically significant for EO nor for LS.

Economic subsidies represent a more complex variable: when it is reported an high economic dependence from them there is a negative effect on EO (α = -0.359, p < .001), whereas when it is reported a low dependence it emerges a positive association with LS (δ = 0.602, p = 0.009), suggesting that economic self-sufficiency – or at least the perception of it – is a powerful predictor of personal satisfaction.

Table 1 – *Estimated direct effects of the model*[3]

	Variables	EO	p-value	LS	p-value
X	Limited Italian	-0.518	0.000	-0.842	0.000
	Poor health	-0.599	0.000	-0.621	0.012
M	Subsidies (ref. no subsidies)				
	low dependence	-0.066	0.683	0.602	0.009
	high dependence	-0.359	0.000	-0.138	0.328
	No. Italian friends	0.026	0.062	0.082	0.000
	Relatives in Italy	-0.012	0.916	0.482	0.002
	Non-Italian friends	0.158	0.185	0.186	0.256
Z and N	Age	0.001	0.776	0.020	0.003
	Woman	-0.281	0.003	-0.046	0.760
	Length of stay in Italy	0.088	0.000	0.033	0.098
	Education (ref. middle school)				
	High	0.227	0.037	0.056	0.743
	Low	-0.131	0.225	-0.064	0.674
	Origin (ref. Africa)				
	Asia	0.200	0.050	0.236	0.100
	Europa	0.131	0.365	0.502	0.043
	South America	0.292	0.166	0.788	0.023
	Residence (ref. Northern Italy)				
	Central Italy	-0.292	0.005	0.280	0.062
	Southern Italy	-0.165	0.155	0.405	0.018
N	Relatedness			0.753	0.000
	Living alone			-0.512	0.001
	EO			0.335	0.000
	Intercept			5.115	0.000

Geographical origin also shows selective effects: compared to refugees from Africa, those from Asia, Europe, and South America present higher LS. A marginally significant effect on EO emerges only for Asian respondents. Residence in Central Italy, compared to the North, is negatively associated with EO but tends to positively influence LS, whereas the South shows positive effects only on LS.

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[3] The model was estimated on a subset made of 928 refugees and asylum seekers due to missing data on the variables included in the analysis.

Among psychological constructs, relatedness (here accounted through a strong appreciation of how Italian people work) is strongly associated with LS ($\lambda = 0.753$, $p < .001$), while living alone has a negative effect ($\lambda = -0.512$, $p = 0.001$), confirming the importance of relational support for perceived well-being.

As predicted by the theoretical model, EO has a direct positive effect on LS ($\beta_1 = 0.335$, $p < .001$), further supporting its mediating role within the model.

The estimates of indirect effects (Table 2) strengthen these interpretations. In particular, poor knowledge of Italian shows a significant indirect negative effect on LS (ind $= -0.174$, $p < .001$), which adds to the direct effect, resulting in a strongly negative total effect (tot $= -1.015$, $p < .001$). The same applies to a poor health status, which presents a significant indirect effect (ind $= -0.201$, $p = 0.002$) in addition to the direct one.

Table 2 – *Estimated indirect and total effects of the mediation model.*

Variable	Indirect effects	p-value	Total effects	p-value
Limited Italian	-0.174	0.000	-1.015	0.000
Poor health	-0.201	0.002	-0.822	0.001
Subsidies (ref. no subsidies)				
low dependence	-0.022	0.683	0.580	0.013
high dependence	-0.12	0.002	-0.259	0.070
No. Italian friends	0.009	0.080	0.091	0.000
Relatives in Italy	-0.004	0.916	0.478	0.002
Non-Italian friends	0.053	0.198	0.239	0.141

Conversely, the number of Italian friends produces a small but significant positive indirect effect, enhancing the total effect on LS. Lastly, the "subsidy" variable plays a multifaceted role: those who report a high dependence on received financial support experience a negative total effect on LS, while those who report a low dependence on subsidies show a significant positive effect.

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to assess the mediating role of employment on the life satisfaction of refugees and asylum seekers living in Italy. As presented in Section 3, the results show that the data supported all three proposed research hypotheses. Specifically, employment outcomes showed a significant and positive direct association with life satisfaction, confirming RH2. RH1 was also supported, barriers – as poor health, low proficiency in the Italian language– were negatively associated with LS. Conversely, certain facilitators—such as having a family network in Italy

or receiving subsidies, even when not significantly affecting the standard of living—were positively associated with length of stay. These findings underscore the pivotal role of both structural barriers and supportive factors in influencing the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers. The analysis further confirmed RH3, indicating that EO mediate the relationship between barriers/facilitators and LS.

Our findings are partially aligned with existing literature. For instance, studies conducted in the United States (Hagstrom *et al*., 2019) also found a strong link between employment and life satisfaction among refugees. However, contrasting evidence from Austria and Germany suggests that the relationship between EO and LS may not be universally positive. In these contexts, employment conditions likely failed to meet refugees' expectations, thus diminishing the beneficial effects of employment on subjective well-being (Haindorfer *et al*., 2024).

Overall, the results suggest that policies aimed at enhancing language skills, strengthening social networks, improving access to healthcare, and promoting economic inclusion may significantly contribute to the well-being of the refugee population. From a policy perspective, this underscores the importance of strengthening access to quality employment opportunities, investing in language acquisition programs, and supporting the development of both local and family-based social networks.

This study is not without limitations. First, the findings may be influenced by the specific characteristics of the Italian labour market and the legislation regulating access to formal employment for refugees and asylum seekers. As such, the results may be context-specific and not generalizable to other national settings. Second, the data do not include information on the quality of employment or job satisfaction among refugees, which likely limits the interpretation of our findings. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts the possibility of drawing causal inferences. Finally, a relatively high percentage of missing cases was recorded; although missingness appears to be uniformly distributed across sex, age, and nationality, more in-depth analysis would be necessary to rule out potential selection bias in the results presented.

Nevertheless, these findings represent a novel contribution to the Italian context, where, to the best of our knowledge, no other survey has directly addressed asylum seekers and refugees at the national level.

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