

THE LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN ITALY

As stated by the IOM Gender Equality Policy 2015-2019, “Gender influences reasons for migrating, who migrates and to where, how people migrate and the networks they use, opportunities and resources available at destinations, and relations with the country of origin.”¹

The analysis of women’s migration is thus useful for several reasons. First, analysing migration flows from a gender perspective helps understanding the reasons that lead women to migrate, as well as the overall strategies adopted by families. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the immigration phenomenon in Italy consisted mainly of men (especially from Albania and Morocco) as “first migrants”. The strategy adopted was then to aim for a family reunification. Differently, between the end of the twentieth century and the first years of the 2000s, migration originating from East Europe (Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova) significantly increased, with a strong presence of women, mainly employed in the expanding care and assistance sector. In this case, the family strategy laid in remittances sent back to one’s home country and foreseeing returning home after some years, with no plan for family reunification.

Second, gender-based analyses also allow to highlight those areas where inequalities are more pronounced and identify the best solution to reduce them. The aforementioned IOM Gender Equality Policy 2015-2019 underscores the central aspects of IOM’s work: “advocating for equal rights under the law in employment and mobility; combating discriminatory migration practices; understanding how gender affects the type of migration undertaken; responding to how gender influences access to social services, economic growth, capacities, risks and vulnerabilities; ensuring diversity and inclusiveness in consultations and participation in activities; and addressing how migration influences gender roles and relations”.

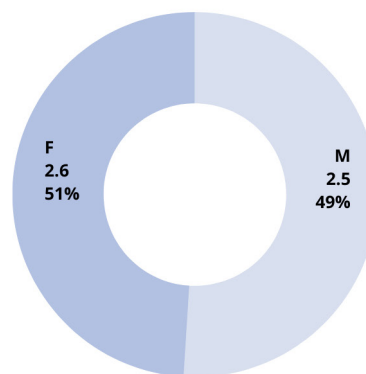
This paper aims to analyse the characteristics of women’s immigration in Italy by a demographic, social, and economic point of view. In particular, it observes the impact of the economic crisis that followed the COVID-19 pandemic, thus with a specific temporal focus on the labour market inclusion of immigrant women.

Women’s immigration in Italy

Out of the 5 million immigrants who resided regularly in Italy by the early 2022, as shown on figure 1, 2.6 million are women, thus slightly outnumbering men (2.5 million).²

In Italy, women’s incidence varies by immigrants’ nationality (figure 2). By observing the first ten most numerous foreign nationalities, the female component reaches the highest peak in the Ukrainian-origin immigrant group (77.8 per cent). Women’s share is also consistent among Romanian and Filipino-origin immigrants (respectively 56.9 per cent and 56.7 per cent), and they appear to be characterised by a high rate of domestic work employment. On the contrary, among North African (Morocco and Egypt) and South Asian-origin immigrants (India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) women’s presence appears less significant. Consistent with the immigration phenomenon of the international panorama, such immigrant groups observed in the Italian context are still characterised by a strong male component, with a tendency for women and children to still be found in the respective country of origin.

Figure 1: Foreign-resident population in Italy, by gender (2022)

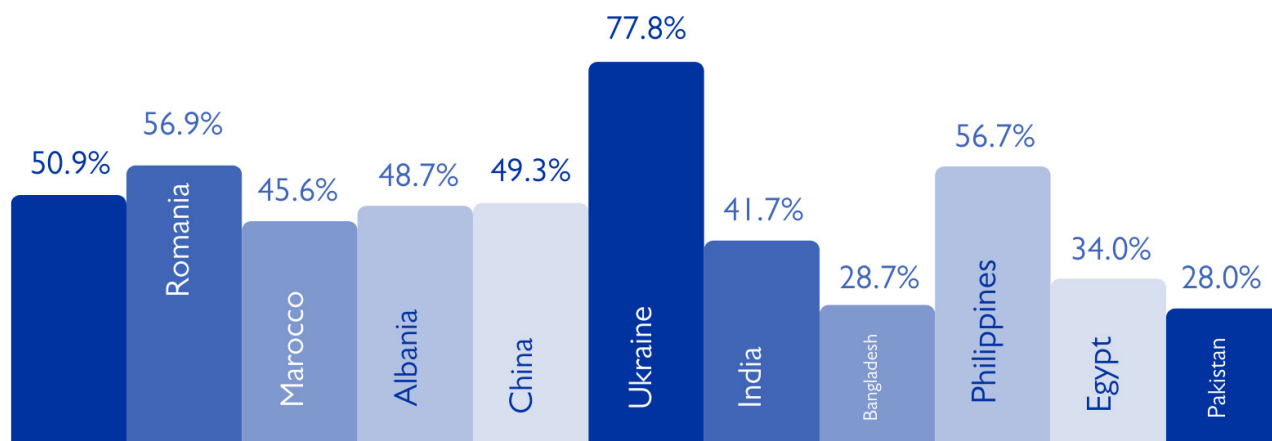


Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on ISTAT data (million)

1. <https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/2018-07/C-106-INF-8-Rev.1-IOM-Gender-Equality-Policy-2015-2019.pdf>

2. Istat, 2022. Foreigners at 1st January. <http://dati.istat.it/>

Figure 2: Women's component in the ten most populous foreign-resident groups in Italy, by nationality (2022)



Total

Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on ISTAT data

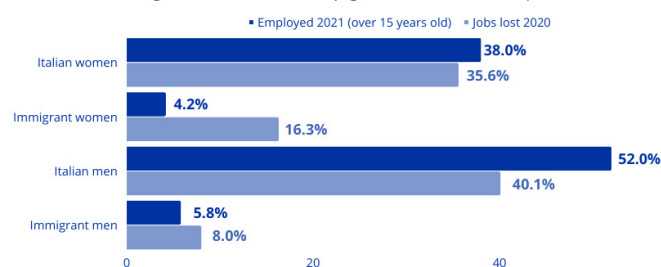
The job market and the impact of Covid-19 pandemic

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic caused in Italy a loss of 724 thousand units in the labour market (-3.1 per cent compared to 2019). In 2021, the progressing lifting of anti-contagion measures determined an increase of employment figures (+169 thousand units compared to 2020, +0.8 per cent). Nonetheless, 2019's levels are still far to reach.

The 2020 occupation crisis did not impact all workers in the same way. In fact, it can be stated that it participated in exacerbating existing inequalities. In the same way, the 2021 occupational recovery did not concern all productive sectors and categories.

Measures in support of families and enterprises implemented in 2020 mainly safeguarded permanent employments. On the contrary, short-term and precarious contracts were the most at a disadvantage. By breaking down the observed 724 thousand lost job positions in 2020 by gender and citizenship, 40.1 per cent concerned Italian men (who represent 52.0 per cent of the total employed in 2021). Meanwhile, foreign women made up 4.2 per cent of all employed workforce in 2021, thus decreasing by 16.3 per cent compared to 2020 (figure 3).

Figure 3: Distribution by gender and citizenship



Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on ISTAT data (million)

The same scenario emerges when analysing the occupational rate by gender and citizenship, (figure 4). In 2021, immigrant women were the category with the lowest occupational rate (45.4 per cent), also showing the largest drop in 2020 (-5.5 points). In 2020, immigrant men, who contrarily displayed the highest 2021 employment rate figures (71.7 per cent), lost 2.8 points. For comparison, Italians, both women and men, registered a decrease in the occupational rate of 1.3 points, attributable to the fact that they are usually positioned in steadier jobs.

Figure 4: Employment rate by gender and citizenship

	Employment rate 15-64 years old (2021)	2019-20 Var.	2020-21 Var.
Italian women	49.9	-1.3	+0.9
Immigrant women	45.4	-5.5	+1.3
Italian men	66.6	-1.3	+0.5
Immigrant men	71.7	-2.8	+0.4
Total	58.2	-1.6	+0.8

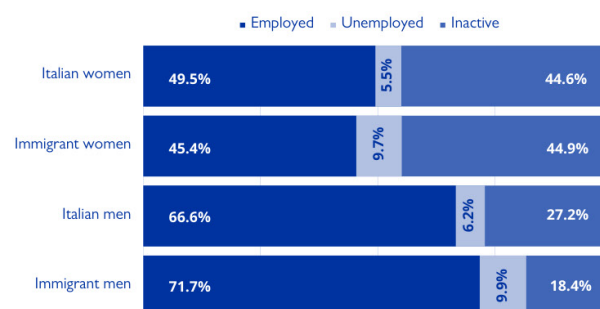
Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on ISTAT data

The scarce female participation in the Italian job market emerges even more clearly in the analysis carried out by gender and citizenship. Almost 45 per cent of immigrant women in working age (15-64 years old) is inactive, meaning they are nor employed nor looking for a job. It must be reminded that also Italian women show similar inactivity rates (44.6 per cent). However, immigrant women are characterised by lower occupational rates (45.4 per cent) compared to their Italian counterpart (49.9 per cent). The lowest rate of inactivity is registered among immigrant men (18.4 per cent), which is sharply lower than their Italian counterpart (27.2 per cent), (figure 5). Such figures could be explained not only by the fact that foreigners have fewer instruments to withstand a period of inactivity; but more critically by the legal framework of the receiving context which envisions the employment status as a sine qua non condition for their (legal) stay in the country. Thus, they often find themselves with little choice but to accept low paid jobs.

The evolution of the occupational rate of Italian and immigrant women shows that the latter were characterised by higher employment rates until 2018, (figure 6). From 2012 to 2019, the simultaneous decrease of immigrant women's occupational rate and the increase of the Italian women's one led to reduce the gap between the two. In 2012, there was a divide of 4.7 points against Italian women; in 2019, the situation turned upside down and Italian women showed 0.7 points more than their immigrant counterpart.

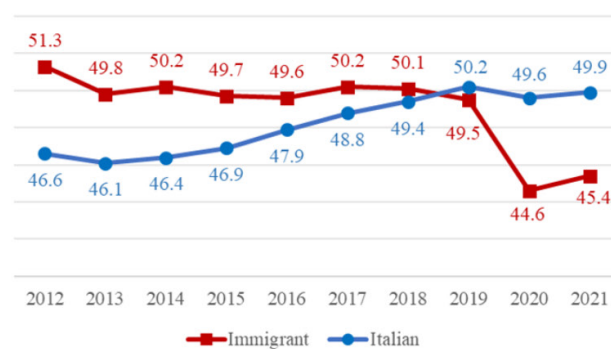
In 2020, as mentioned, immigrant women's occupation was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 emergency, reducing immigrant women's rate to 5 points less than what displayed by Italian women. In 2021, such gap was slightly reduced and it stabilised to 4.5 points in favour of Italian women.

Figure 5: Distribution by occupational categories, gender and citizenship (15-64 years old), 2021



Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on ISTAT data

Figure 6: Female employment rate (15-64 years old) in Italy, Immigrant / Italian women comparison



Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on ISTAT data

The European comparative perspective

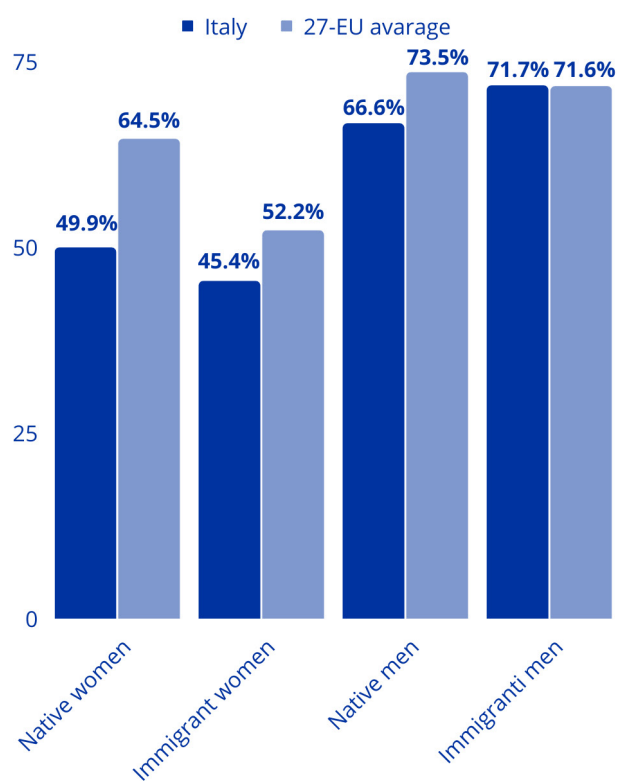
After the analysis of the occupational panorama of immigrant women in Italy, it is noteworthy to compare the Italian situation to the average of the European Union.

In particular, by tabulating the “gender” and “citizenship” variables, it is possible to analyse the occupational rates of the following four arising groups: native women, immigrant women, native men, and immigrant men.

Italy registers a discernible gap with the EU-27 average in three out of the four groups, with the exception of immigrant men (figure 7). Moreover, the divide is the largest for native women, indicating that gender-related discriminations in a wide range of areas, from the public to the private spheres, do not only concern immigrant component.

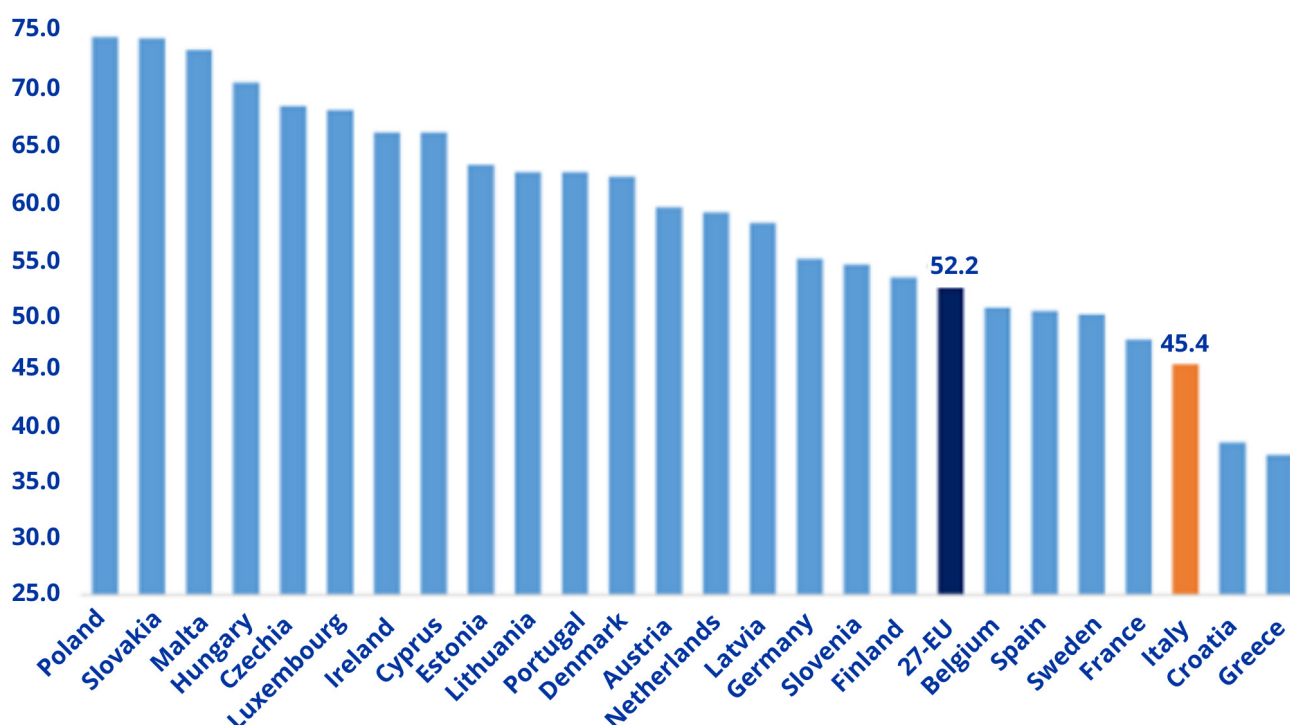
The gap between the occupational rate of Italy and the EU-27 is significant (6.8 points). In addition, the comparison with the EU-27 average, (figure 8) shows that immigrant women’s employment rate in Italy is one of the lowest in Europe, as it exceeds only that of Croatia and Greece.

Figure 7: Employments rate by gender and citizenship (15-64 years old), Italy/ 27 EU average comparison, 2021



Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on EUROSTAT data

Figure 8: Immigrant women’s employment rate (15-64 years old) European comparison, 2021



Fondazione Leone Moressa elaboration on EUROSTAT data

Conclusions

This paper draws attention to the long road that remains to achieve full gender equality in Italy, among immigrants and beyond.

However, the gender-based approach is now proving to be an axiological compass for the implementation of social and economic inclusion policies. The Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 launched by the European Commission³ underlines that “Inclusion for all is about ensuring that all policies are accessible to and work for everyone, including migrants. This means adapting and transforming mainstream policies to the needs of a diverse society, taking into account the specific challenges and needs of different groups. The gender perspective and the fight against discrimination must become the norm”. In this perspective, ensuring that more migrant women participate in the labour market turns very patently to be one of the leading aims and funding precepts of the European Commission’s Action Plan.

By narrowing the geographical focus to the national level, through its multi-annual Agenda for Work Integration and Social Inclusion 2021 - 2027⁴ Italy is also working in parallel to the above-mentioned European guidelines to promote social and professional inclusion policies for the social groups that tend to be more vulnerable and marginalised. The Agenda’s strategies and priorities target migrants in particular, for example by promoting cooperation between actors working in the relevant social and labour sectors institutions and ensuring valid and regular forms of employment.

The following section also presents some of the best practices implemented in Italy to support immigrant women. As it transpires, these best practices not only offer immigrant women virtual instruments such as language competences, vocational, and technical competences to independently navigate the receiving context and thus raising the chances to integrate in the occupational market.

They also provide the means to get in contact and familiarise with local territories and communities so to allow a broader social integration, as well as the tools for women to recognise episodes and situations of risks (such as exploitation and discrimination) and be able to face them while protecting themselves.

Between 2018 and 2019, the WEMIN Project (Migrant Women Empowerment and Integration),⁵ funded by the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF-2016-AG-INTE / grant agreement no.776211) and managed by a partnership of eight European countries, promoted actions for the inclusion and participation of women. In particular, more than 150 migrant and refugee women were supported to enhance their communication skills and safety of movement and interaction in the host society by participating to language, educational, and vocational training and by being offered loci of interaction with the native local community.

Within this context, a particularly sensitive theme is the reception and assistance of women victims of trafficking. The Associazione Liberazione e Speranza and the Agenzia Formativa Filos (2009-2019) implemented different projects in the Novara Province funded by the Equal Opportunities Sector of the Piemonte Region.⁶ The underlying purpose of these projects was to conjugate active labour market policies with policies for equal opportunities, with the aim of creating proposals to support the access to the job market of “disadvantaged women”, in this case foreign women, who were victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking and who were included in integration programmes ex Article 18 of the Consolidated Act of Immigration (Testo Unico sull’immigrazione).

3. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0758&from=EN>

4. <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/en-gb/Dettaglio-approfondimento/id/42>

5. <http://www.wemin-project.eu/it/>

6. <https://www.minplusproject.eu/insegnami-a-fare-da-sola-il-sostegno-al-le-donne-vittime-di-tratta-in-fuga-dallo-sfruttamento-nel-novarese/>

These projects addressed the issue that, once women begin to recover from such exploitative experiences, they often have great difficulty in achieving social and occupational reintegration. Work is considered as a means of empowerment and emancipation, as it allows to maintain one's dignity and autonomy, (re)create a life plan, and strive for social integration. Most often, women who have been trafficked and exploited are dependent on reception services due to their lack of autonomy, self-esteem, work and educational skills. It is difficult for them to break free from the label of "victim of "trafficking and sexual exploitation" and even more difficult for them to find employment.

Lastly, it is worth observing the rise of immigrant women entrepreneurs. The 2021 Report on the Observatory of financial and socioeconomic inclusion of migrant-owned enterprises⁷ shows that, although displaying lower figures, businesses led by migrant women have been subject to the same fluctuations as the whole number of migrant-owned enterprises, thus reflecting a relative level of soundness of such female component. Furthermore, in a journal article published on 9 June 2020 by LaVoce.info,⁸ the authors emphasise that women's entrepreneurship, although still a minority, has shown a continuous growing trend in the last years, both among native and immigrant-origin women. The research highlights an interesting aspect: the "carry-over" effect. Men are primarily influenced by men to become entrepreneurs, while women are primarily influenced by other women.

Men and women who come from countries that tend to have a more equal panorama show no significant difference in the carry-over effect. In contrast, women who come from countries with a high degree of gender inequality show a lower transmission effect than their male counterparts. Thus, women's ability to build a network is critically influenced by the gender culture in which they are embedded. This means that projects should encourage the creation of new businesses through the experiences of already-existing businesses, given how vibrant the phenomenon of immigrant entrepreneurship is.

To conclude, the Italian policy programme should give further priority to the implementation of all those measures aimed at counteracting gender inequalities, both in the field of active labour market policies and in the measures aimed at the socioeconomic integration of immigrants. The resources provided by the PNRR should not be undervalued⁹ and, in particular, emphasis should be placed on reforms and actions that protect and promote gender equality. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that precisely because of national social and professional structures, care must be taken to ensure the development of equal opportunities for both men and women: in fact, "immigrant women and girls in particular face additional barriers to integration compared to immigrant men and boys, as they often have to overcome structural barriers related to being both immigrants and women, including confronting stereotypes."¹⁰

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7. <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/it-it/Dettaglio-approfondimento/id/40/Imprese-migranti-I Osservatorio-e-la-dashboard-interattiva>

8. <https://www.lavoce.info/archives/67666/quando-limprenditore-e-donna-e-straniera/>

9. National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale Ripresa e Resilienza). 30.04.2022. <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>

10. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0758&from=EN>

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