Rural-urban (Im)mobility, Occupational Achievement, and Social Inequalities in Europe

Research on internal migration highlights its role as a mechanism of both social mobility and social reproduction. In economic terms, migration has been conceptualized as a form of human-capital investment (Sjaastad, 1962), with documented positive returns on occupational achievement, particularly in regions with marked disparities in employment opportunities (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Mulder & van Ham, 2005). In the European context, studies on inter- and intragenerational mobility (Breen, 2004; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992) have highlighted the importance of spatial opportunities in shaping class trajectories, although outcomes remain strongly conditioned by institutional frameworks, regional development patterns, and gendered divisions of labor.

A central theoretical contribution is Fielding's (1992) *escalator region* hypothesis, developed in the context of South East England. According to this model, large metropolitan regions act as "escalators" for occupational careers: individuals move to big cities to advance professionally, accumulate experience and resources, and can move elsewhere later in life. However, escalator regions show that the strength of the effect depends on regional labor markets, housing costs, and occupational structures. In these frameworks, internal migration is not merely a geographical phenomenon, but a form of social mobility mediated by place-specific opportunities. So, we ask: *to what extent does migration from rural origins to other rural or urban areas influence the occupational outcomes of individuals?* **(RQ 1)**

Internal migrants moving to metropolitan areas generally attain higher occupational positions than stayers (Fielding, 1992), but the returns to mobility are highly unequal—largely determined by differences in education, social origin, and gender. Education and family resources tend to increase the likelihood of migration by reducing associated costs and risks (Chiswick, 1999). Education enhances spatial flexibility, increasing individuals' ability to identify employment opportunities in dynamic urban economies. Highly educated workers tend to be more mobile across sectors and better able to align their qualifications with urban labor market demands, while less educated individuals generally have lower spatial mobility and face greater difficulties accessing high-quality employment, especially in segmented labor markets such as those of Southern Europe.

Family background, particularly parental social class, further shapes occupational trajectories, interacting with education in complex ways. When it amplifies the advantages of those from privileged backgrounds, it functions as a boosting effect, amplifying advantages from privileged backgrounds (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). Conversely, it can present a cumulative disadvantage for those from less advanced geographical and social origins. However, a compensatory effect may instead be present when internal mobility enables individuals from lower-class origins to improve their occupational status (Erola & Kilpi-Jakonen, 2017). Building on this literature, migrants from disadvantaged rural or working-class origins may use mobility to escape agricultural or low-skilled employment, whereas individuals from higher social classes are more likely to leverage migration to gain access to high-status occupations.

Finally, gender differences in mobility decisions and outcomes are significant, with research suggesting that men and women experience internal migration differently, both in terms of motivations and returns (Cooke, 2008). While migration to large cities increases upward mobility for men and women, effects can be heterogeneous depending on type of migration and family status (De Jong & Graefe, 2008). Thus, *how do gender, social class, and educational background shape the occupational outcomes associated with rural–urban migration, and do these factors contribute to reinforcing or mitigating existing social inequalities?* **(RQ 2)**

Comparative evidence indicates that education and social origin affect migration outcomes differently across Europe. In Northern and Western countries, higher education enhances both the propensity to migrate and the occupational returns to mobility, reflecting more fluid labor markets and meritocratic opportunity structures (Fielding, 1992). By contrast, in Southern Europe, historically characterized by lower rates of internal mobility, more segmented labor structures and persistent regional disparities (Mulder et al., 2022), geographical mobility disproportionately benefits individuals from higher social origins, who are better positioned to capitalize on urban labor market opportunities (Impicciatore & Panichella, 2019). These structural differences make Southern Europe a particularly interesting case for examining how internal migration interacts with class and gender inequalities. We ask: *how do the effects of rural–urban migration on occupational outcomes vary across European regions, and in particular between Southern and Northern Europe?* **(RQ 3)**

Data, methods, and preliminary results:

Analyses are based on two waves of the SHARE dataset (Survey on Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe) providing life-history information about representative samples of respondents aged fifty and over living in Europe, with retrospective life history questionnaires on geographical mobility, education, occupational history, and family and reproductive behavior. After merging and harmonizing the two waves and selecting six comparable countries for study (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Poland), the resulting dataset contains 25,106 individuals born between 1930 and 1969. We focus only on individuals whose area of origin is a rural area, to be able to clearly assess differences in occupational attainment that emerge by their future areas of residence, with a final sample size of 16,039.

The main independent variable in the study is area of residence for individuals that come from rural areas. That is, individuals who lived in a rural area at 15 years of age and either remained in the same *rural area* throughout their life course, who moved from one *rural* area to another, or who at one point moved to an *urban area.* The longitudinal data provide information on whether an individual resided in an urban or rural area in each year of observation. However, because residence in an urban area may confer skills and occupational opportunities, individuals are classified into the 'urban' category from the year they first move to an urban area onward, regardless of any subsequent return to a rural area. We operationalize three occupational outcomes as dependent variables of labor market outcomes, using classifications from the Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero occupational class scheme (EGP) (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). The outcomes are employment, entering the service class, and avoiding the working class. The latter two dependent variables are dependent upon the prerequisite of employment – that is, an individual must be employed in order to be able to either join the service class or avoid the working class.

Analyses are run separately by gender, and time-varying control variables include dummies for marriage, age, and children, with an interaction between time period and country. Additional models use education, social class of origin, and country to divide the sample. We estimate a set of Linear Probability Panel Models with Fixed Effects to quantify the effect of geographical mobility on occupational attainment for men and women. To account for unobserved differences across individuals that are constant over time, we use a fixed-effects (within) specification, in which unobserved covariates are time-constant.

The first model (Table 1) looks at the outcomes of rural or urban mobility compared to stayers for the three outcomes. The second model explores potential differences by level of education, estimating the predicted probabilities of each outcome (for space, only Figure 1), and the third model will do the

same except looking at social class of origin. Lastly, further models will elucidate cross-country differences, particularly between Southern Europe and other regions.

Table 1 Impact of Area of Residence on Three Occupational Outcomes for Men and Women. Coefficients with standard errors from Linear Probability Panel Models with Fixed Effects.

	Employment		**Avoid Working Class**		**Join Service Class**	
	Coef.	(S.E.)	Coef.	(S.E.)	Coef.	(S.E.)
MEN (ref: rural)						
Rural-rural	0.04***	(0.01)	-0.00	(0.00)	-0.00	(0.00)
Rural-urban	0.09***	(0.00)	-0.01***	(0.00)	0.02***	(0.00)
Constant	0.29***	(0.01)	0.73***	(0.01)	0.07***	(0.00)
Observations	299,461		240,678		240,678	
Number of id	7,312		7,087		7,087	
WOMEN (ref: rural)						
Rural-rural	0.01**	(0.01)	-0.04***	(0.00)	0.03***	(0.00)
Rural-urban	0.09***	(0.00)	-0.02***	(0.00)	-0.00	(0.00)
Constant	0.27***	(0.01)	0.78***	(0.01)	0.15***	(0.00)
Observations	355,334		194,984		194,984	
Number of id	8,711		7,407		7,407	

*Note*s: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Control variables of marriage, children, age and, interaction between period and country not shown.

Preliminary results from Table 1 confirm a positive effect of both rural-rural and rural-urban mobility on employment, which is highest for both men and women who move to an urban area. This suggests that urban destinations offer broader employment opportunities and higher chances of labor market integration compared to rural areas. However, the results are not entirely consistent across other indicators of occupational attainment. For men, neither type of mobility appears to significantly reduce the likelihood of remaining in the working class, indicating that mobility alone may not guarantee upward occupational mobility. For women, the results are even less favorable, showing negative associations with occupational advancement and suggesting potential barriers in translating mobility into higher-status employment. When considering access to the service class, only rural–urban mobility shows a significant positive impact for men, whereas for women, rural–rural mobility appears to play a more meaningful role.

Figure 1 presents the results of Model 2, stratified by level of education, only for the outcome of employment, for the sake of space. Within each level of education, clear differences emerge by migration trajectory. Among men, those who remain in the same rural area consistently exhibit the lowest predicted probabilities of employment, suggesting that immobility may limit access to labor market opportunities. Rural-rural and rural-urban movers display similar employment probabilities among men with up to an upper secondary education, indicating that migration, regardless of destination, can be beneficial at lower educational levels. However, for men with tertiary education, the advantage of rural-urban mobility becomes much more pronounced, with significantly higher predicted probabilities of employment, likely reflecting the concentration of skilled job opportunities in urban settings. For women, the pattern diverges somewhat. The rural-rural trajectory appears particularly disadvantageous for more highly educated women, who face lower employment probabilities compared to their rural-urban counterparts. This may point to structural or cultural constraints that limit the returns to education in rural labor markets. Nevertheless, across most educational levels, the rural-urban trajectory remains the most advantageous for women as well,

emphasizing the continued importance of urban destinations for achieving favorable employment outcomes, regardless of gender.

Further results show differences that emerge for the other two outcomes of occupational attainment, finding heterogeneity particularly in the less-often studied rural-rural migration trajectory and by level of education, with the same replicated for social class of origin. Finally, the comparative dimension of the study will highlight cross-country and regional variations, illustrating how structural, economic, and institutional contexts mediate the relationship between mobility and occupational outcomes, especially given the particularities of Southern Europe.

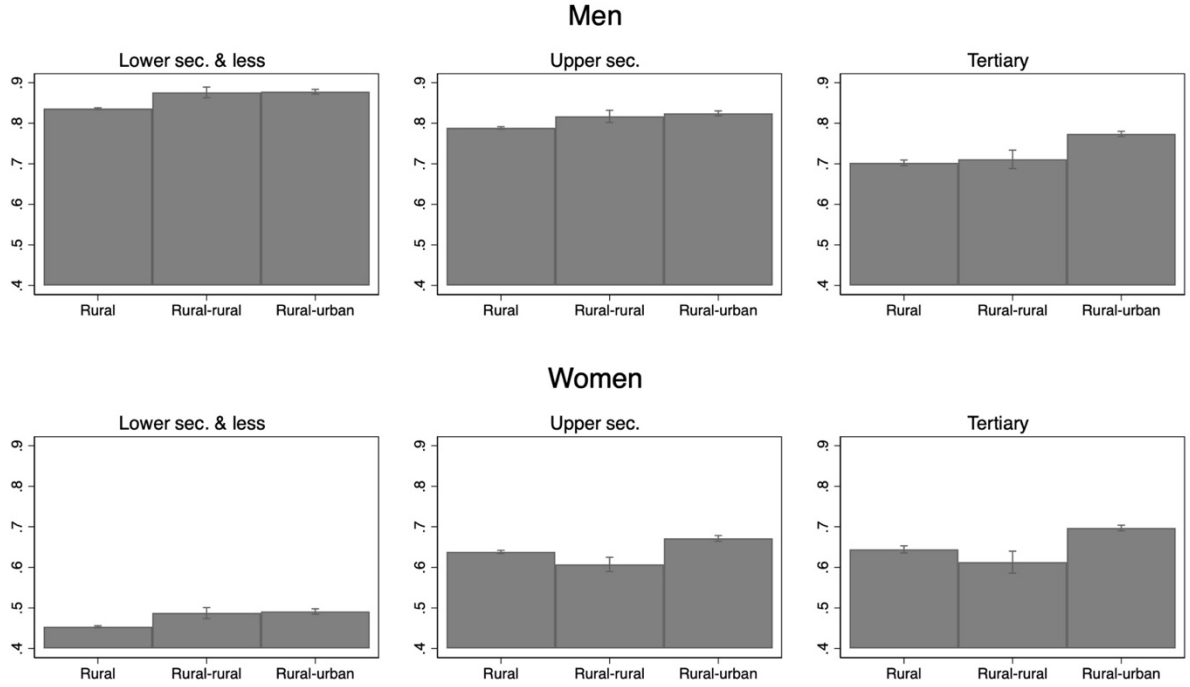

Figure 1 Predicted probabilities of employment by education and migration. Linear probability panel models with FE.

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