

Fertility Intentions among Migrants in Italy: Exploring Gendered Patterns across Origins

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Extended abstract

Introduction

Since 2010, Italy has consolidated its role as a major immigration country, with foreign-born residents becoming a structural component of demographic dynamics (Strozza, 2017). In 2010, migrants represented about 7% of the population; by early 2024, this share had risen to 8.9%, with more than 5.25 million foreign-born residents officially registered (ISTAT, 2025; ISMU, 2025). Including naturalized citizens and second-generation individuals, the population with a migratory background now exceeds 6.2 million, or roughly 10.6% of the total population (IDOS, 2024). This growth occurred despite economic crises and fluctuating inflows, underscoring the resilience of migration as a demographic driver. Immigration has partially offset Italy's negative natural balance and contributed to population renewal, particularly through births to foreign mothers, which rose from 4% of total births in 1999 to around 20% in the early 2010s (Giannantoni & Strozza, 2015). Recent years have marked record inflows—378,000 foreign arrivals in 2023 and 382,000 in 2024, the highest levels in a decade—driven by humanitarian crises and labor demand (ISTAT, 2024). Migrants now play a structural role in demographic dynamics: in 2024, over 21% of newborns had at least one foreign parent, partially mitigating Italy's persistent fertility decline and population aging (Eurostat, 2024; Strozza et al., 2016). At the same time, recent trends show stabilization in fertility among migrants and growing heterogeneity in settlement patterns, raising new challenges for integration and social cohesion (Strozza & De Santis, 2017).

There is a well established tradition of research that has analyzed both the tempo and quantum of childbirth in European countries all along migrants' biographies, and especially during their stay in the host country to test for several fertility hypotheses (i.e.: adaptation, socialization, selection, disruption and interrelation of events). Recently, there has been a growing interest in studying other aspects related to migrants' reproductive decision-making process (ideal fertility, desired family size, childbearing intentions, etc.). Most of these studies have adapted the former-mentioned fertility hypotheses (previously applied to actual behaviour) to the study of migrants' fertility desires and intentions. The few studies carried out in the Italian context focused on fertility intentions has shown that, generally speaking, migrants tend to have higher short-term fertility intentions than natives, finding also significant differences among migrants according to their country of citizenship and between foreigners and Italians. However, their findings

have been limited to great aggregations of countries of citizenship, in some cases, and to women only, in others. Thus, with respect to previous studies, we extend research on migrant's fertility, going beyond their actual fertility behaviours, to more accurately characterize their reproductive norms. To this end this contribution analyzes short-term fertility intentions of partnered migrants aged 18-45 in Italy by exploring whether and how their declared parity intentions to have a(nother) child within a three years-frame differ between women and men and across origins.

This study addresses two major gaps in the literature. First, it provides a direct gender comparison of short-term fertility intentions among migrants in Italy, an area where evidence remains scarce. Second, it examines how these intentions vary across origins and life-course factors such as age at arrival and length of stay and current legal status. By doing so, it contributes to debates on adaptation versus persistence of cultural norms and the gendered nature of reproductive strategies in migration contexts, particularly in low fertility ones.

The central aim of this article is to analyze short-term fertility intentions of migrants in Italy, focusing on differences by gender and origin. Specifically, we try to answer the following research questions:

- Do short-term fertility intentions differ between migrant women and men?
- Do intentions vary across countries of birth?
- Are gender differences consistent across origins?
- How do age at arrival/length of stay influence intentions?
- Are the drivers of fertility intentions the same for men and women?

State of the art -in brief

Evidence comparing fertility intentions between migrant men and women remains limited. Only a few studies (Carlsson, 2019; Ahamed Mondal, 2024) provide robust male–female analyses, as most research focuses primarily on women, restricting the generalizability of findings on gender differences. Existing studies suggest that adaptation to host-country fertility norms tends to occur more rapidly among women than men. Men often show slower convergence and, in some cases, report higher fertility intentions than non-immigrant men (Carlsson, 2019). For example, research on Polish migrants in the Netherlands indicates that women are more likely than men to express strong negative fertility intentions, regardless of health status (Ahamed Mondal, 2024).

In the Italian context, migrant women generally report higher positive and lower negative short-term fertility intentions compared to natives (Mussino et al., 2021). Conversely, among natives, Italian women display stronger negative intentions than Italian men (García-Pereiro et al., 2025). Overall, migrants tend to have higher fertility intentions than non-migrants, a pattern observed across different countries and contexts. However, origin plays a crucial role: migrants from high-fertility settings—or where large families are normative—typically maintain higher fertility intentions and ideal family sizes than those from low-fertility origins. These differences are moderated by destination context and time since migration (Carlsson, 2019; Puur et al., 2019; Impicciatore et al., 2020; Mussino et al., 2021; Ahamed Mondal, 2024; García-Pereiro & Paterno, 2025). In Italy, for instance, Moroccan and sub-Saharan African women exhibit higher positive fertility intentions, while Romanian, Albanian, and other Eastern European women show comparatively higher negative intentions (Mussino et al., 2021).

Even if we are not able to directly test for any theoretical framework regarding intended migrants' fertility, we could explore the presence of signs of some of them. In particular, and knowing that natives' fertility intentions in Italy are very low, we could make use of the adaptation, socialization and interrelation of events hypotheses to guide this analysis (Hervitz, 1985; Kulu, 2003; Milewski, 2007, 2010). Adaptation might be occurring if migrants gradually -as their length of their stay increases- align their fertility intentions with host-country norms, instead or complementary, socialization might hold if migrants fertility intentions tend to resemble more those of their countries of origin in relation to the age at which they arrived to Italy, but we expect this result to be origin-specific and highly dependent on the migration project. Moreover, as migration and family-related events -such as union formation and childbearing- are closely intertwined and often occur in rapid succession, reflecting coordinated life strategies (Mulder &

Wagner, 1993; Kulu & Milewski, 2007) changes in fertility intentions around the timing of migration might be pointing out to interrelation.

Empirical evidence also shows that origin matters: migrants from high-fertility countries tend to maintain higher fertility ideals, but these differences diminish over time (Carlsson, 2019; Impicciatore et al., 2020). Gendered patterns suggest that women adapt faster, while men may retain stronger pronatalist norms (Ahamed Mondal, 2024).

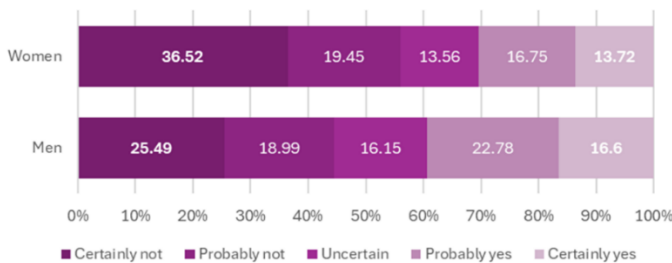
Data and Methods

We use data from FOLCSI 2024 (“Formation, Employment, Care Work and Health of Immigrants and persons with migratory background in Italy”), the most recent survey providing detailed information on short-term fertility intentions in Italy providing a representative sample of adult individuals of foreign origin (foreign immigrants and their immediate descendants regardless of citizenship and legal presence status at the time of interview) residing in Lombardy, Lazio, Campania, and Apulia. For our empirical analyses we selected over the full sample partnered individuals aged 18–45 born abroad, obtaining a selected sample of 1,592 men and 1,600 women.

The dependent variable for the analyses is binary and captures strong negative fertility intentions: “Certainly not” vs. other responses (Figure 1). Independent variables considered are age groups, level of education of the respondent, self-perceived health status, parity, employment status, partner living in the same household, type of union -marriage, type of union -mixed, level of education of the partner, migration intentions, religiosity -frequency, number of siblings, motivation for migration and region of residence in Italy. In this occasion our main independent variables of interest are: gender, country of birth, and the combination of both, age at arrival and migrant status.

Thru binary logistic regressions we estimate the likelihood of declaring strong negative fertility intentions, with unique model estimations for men and women with interaction terms between covariates of interest and gender. Adjusted predictions illustrate differences across key covariates.

Figure 1. Short-term fertility intentions of migrants in Italy by gender.



Source: own elaboration, FOLCSI data.

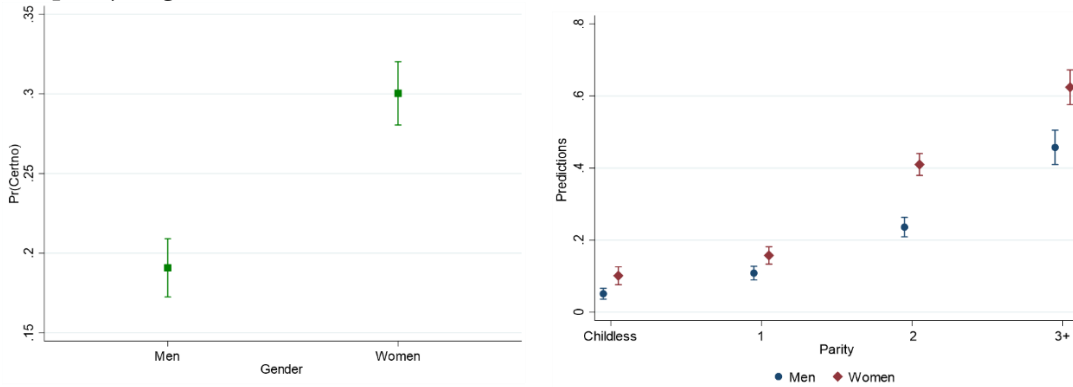
Main results

As shown in Figure 1, women report higher strong negative intentions (36.5%) than men (25.5%), while men show slightly higher strong positive intentions (16.6% vs. 13.7%). Regression results confirm that gender differences are significant for strong negative intentions (Figure 2¹, left), suggesting that migrant women might perceive greater constraints to short term fertility outcomes than men —possibly due to work conditions and care responsibilities. It is interesting to note that differences in the likelihood of reporting strong negative fertility intentions between women and men increases as parity increase (Figure 2, right).

The country of birth strongly shapes fertility intentions but there are interesting differences between men and women (Figure 3). In general, women consistently report stronger negative intentions than men, which might be a first sign indicating a faster adaptation to Italy’s low-fertility context. More specifically, among men and women coming from some countries of origin likelihoods hardly differ (i.e.: China, Philippines, Senegal) but when considering other origins (Nigeria, Pakistan, Ukraine, etc...), significant differences appear.

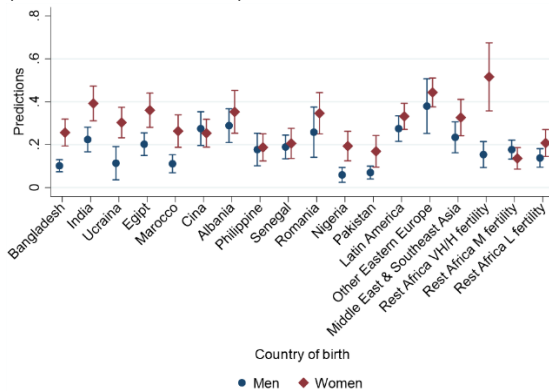
¹ Figures are shown together even if not having the same scale for the sake of saving space.

Figure 2. Adjusted predictions of strong negative FIs of migrants in Italy by gender (left) and by gender and parity (right -from interactions).



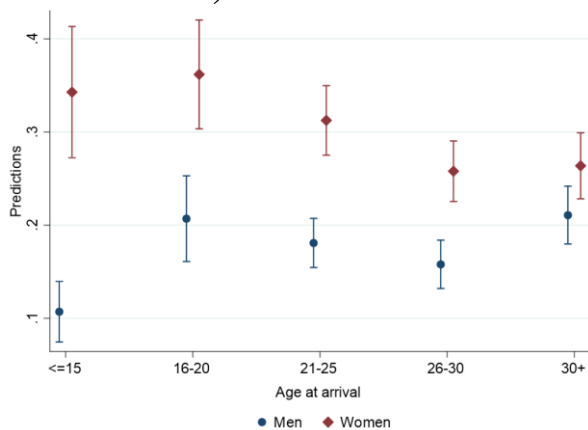
Source: own elaboration, FOLCSI data.

Figure 3. Adjusted predictions of strong negative FIs of migrants in Italy by country of birth and gender (-from interactions).



Source: own elaboration, FOLCSI data.

Figure 4. Adjusted predictions of strong negative FIs of migrants in Italy by age at arrival and gender (-from interactions).



Source: own elaboration, FOLCSI data.

Age at arrival influences migrants' fertility intentions but gender matters (Figure 4). Strong negative intentions decrease with older age at arrival among women, while differences observed in this likelihood between men and women peak at younger ages and decline at older ones. These findings might be suggesting socialization as the most accurate hypothesis to explain not only men's higher positive intentions respect to women but also higher differences at younger ages at arrival between men and women. Instead, adaptation surges as a clue explanation for women, which are more likely to express strong negative intentions, even if coming from high-fertility origins. Even when considering that adaptation and socialization are not competing but complementary hypothesis, results seems to be pointing out to a faster adaptation of women to a very low fertility setting at destination. A question

remains: Women seem to be adapting faster to our low fertility setting, but why? the burden of having a child might be heavier for migrant women and depress their fertility intentions.

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