

GENDER, MIGRATION AND ORIGIN: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF NEETS WITH A MIGRATORY BACKGROUND IN ITALY

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of youth disengagement from education and work has become a central concern across Europe, signalling growing inequalities in the transition to adulthood (Rahmani et al., 2024). In Italy, the share of young people who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) remains among the highest in the EU, reflecting structural weaknesses and persistent barriers to equal labour market participation (Odoardi et al., 2023). Within this group, young people with a migratory background face multiple and intersecting disadvantages that hinder their full inclusion in education and employment (Azzolini et al., 2019; Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2021; Panichella et al., 2021).

According to the most recent Eurostat (2024) data on individuals aged 15–34, Italy continues to register one of the highest NEET rates in Europe. The overall share of NEETs is 17.3% (14.2% for men and 20.6% for women). Among foreign citizens, the rate rises to 27.4%, with a sharp gender divide (41.6% for women and 14.8% for men). These figures reveal both a persistent native-migrant gap and an amplification of gender inequalities within the migrant population.

Our study aims to investigate the phenomenon of NEETs among young people with a migratory background in Italy through an intersectional lens, examining the combined role of gender, migratory generation, and ethnic origin, as well as their interactions. Using micro-level data from the FOLCSI survey (2024) and applying regression models, we analyse the factors associated with NEET status and how they vary across gender, generation, and origin. We expect that the interplay between these dimensions will generate distinct mechanisms of vulnerability.

Specifically, we explore how socio-economic resources, family composition (such as marital status and the presence of children), and social factors (including experience of discrimination and access to support networks) shape the likelihood of being NEET among different subgroups of the migrant population.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The category of NEETs has emerged in policy and research to capture the complexity of youth exclusion, yet it encompasses a highly heterogeneous population, including unemployed youth actively seeking work, discouraged jobseekers, and inactive young people engaged in unpaid family care or having withdrawn from both education and employment. This heterogeneity implies that the drivers of NEET status differ significantly according to gender, socio-economic background, cultural norms, and migration-related factors (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022; Rahmani et al., 2024; Zanfrini & Giuliani, 2023).

In Italy, structural difficulties in the school-to-work transition have been exacerbated by regional disparities, limited activation policies, and the predominance of low-quality jobs (Avola, 2014; Quintano et al., 2018). These weaknesses particularly affect young people with a migratory background, who face double barriers: lower educational outcomes and greater challenges in accessing stable and well-paid employment (Han & Hermansen, 2024). For first-generation immigrants, studies document shorter school careers and higher rates of early school leaving (Buonomo et al., 2018; Birkelund, 2019), as well as elevated levels of labour market precariousness and occupational segregation (Fullin & Reyneri, 2011; Panichella et al., 2021; Piccitto et al., 2024). Among the second generation, the main challenge shifts toward over-education and unemployment, reflecting enduring barriers in translating educational credentials into appropriate labour-market positions (Buonomo et al., 2023).

Gender and family-structure factors also play a critical role, especially for migrant women. Marital status and having children often lead women to exit the labour force or become inactive, especially when migration is linked to family reunification and originates from regions with strong gendered role expectations (Delaporte & Kulu, 2024). Social norms about female care responsibilities and limited access to formal childcare exacerbate the risk of disengagement from both education and work.

The literature identifies a number of facilitating factors for educational and labour-market integration. Proficiency in the host country’s language, higher individual educational level, elevated socio-economic status of the family of origin and secure legal residence status all contribute positively to integration outcomes (Gracia et al., 2016; Birgier & Bar-Haim, 2023; D’Ambrosio & di Padova, 2023).

Furthermore, social networks and discrimination emerge as critical social-relational factors shaping integration pathways. Restricted access to support networks, weak social ties and perceived discrimination undermine both schooling continuance and labour-market entry (Lancee, 2021; Brinbaum, 2023). For instance, migrants who report frequent experiences of discrimination are more likely to withdraw from job search or education, thereby increasing their risk of NEET status.

DATA AND METHODS

We use innovative data from the FOLCSI Survey (Formation, Employment, Care Work and Health of Immigrants and Persons with a Migratory Background in Italy), conducted in 2024. The FOLCSI survey provides a representative dataset of 12,608 adults aged 18 and over with a migratory background. Data were collected in four Italian regions (Lombardy, Lazio, Campania, and Apulia) through a centre-based sampling design (Blangiardo, 1996), which also enabled the inclusion of individuals not officially registered as residents. Our analytical sample includes young people aged under 35, totalling 5,582 individuals (see Table 1). One of the main strengths of the dataset lies in the size and diversity of the sample of immigrant descendants: 2,182 individuals, including 697 second generation. The survey also captures a wide range of origins and citizenship groups, allowing fine-grained analyses of NEET patterns among both first-generation immigrants and their descendants.

We conduct multivariate analyses to identify the factors associated with the likelihood of being NEET among young people with a migratory background in Italy. The analysis relies on binary logistic regression models, where the dependent variable (NEET status) equals 1 for individuals who are neither in employment, education, or training, and 0 otherwise. The NEET indicator is constructed using information on respondents’ labour market status and current enrolment in education or vocational training. Our main explanatory variables capture the intersection of gender, migratory generation, and region of origin, allowing us to examine how these dimensions jointly shape the probability of being NEET. Additional covariates include socio-economic resources (such as education level of parents), human capital (individual educational level and language proficiency), family composition (marital status and presence of children), and social integration factors, including experience of discrimination and access to support networks.

Table 1. - Descriptive characteristics of the sample (aged 18–34) and share of NEETs within each category (Unweighted data).

	Total			Males			Females		
	N	%	% NEET	N	%	% NEET	N	%	% NEET
Total	5582	100	21.2	3298	59.1	18.5	2284	40.9	25.2
Age group									
18-24	2087	37.4	20.6	1280	38.8	23.5	807	35.3	15.9
25-29	1880	33.7	21.1	1117	33.9	16.4	763	33.4	27.9
30-34	1615	28.9	22.3	901	27.3	14.0	714	31.3	32.8
Migratory generation									
G1	3400	60.9	25.2	2153	65.3	21.2	1247	54.6	32.2

G1.25 & G1.5	1092	19.6	14.0	640	19.4	11.3	452	19.8	17.9
G1.75 & G2	1090	19.5	16.0	505	15.3	16.0	585	25.6	15.9
Region of origin									
Eastern Europe	762	13.7	20.1	310	9.4	16.1	452	19.8	22.8
North Africa	1167	20.9	24.9	752	22.8	21.8	415	18.2	30.4
West Africa	1134	20.3	25.9	853	25.9	21.2	281	12.3	40.2
Rest of Africa	272	4.9	26.5	168	5.1	29.8	104	4.6	21.2
Middle East and South-Central Asia	1348	24.1	20.6	859	26.0	15.5	489	21.4	29.7
East Asia	424	7.6	7.5	170	5.2	5.3	254	11.1	9.1
Latin America	475	8.5	13.9	186	5.6	12.4	289	12.7	14.9
Legal residence status									
Not registered	1229	22.0	28.4	814	24.7	30.3	415	18.2	24.6
Registered	4353	78.0	19.2	2484	75.3	14.6	1869	81.8	25.3
Educational level									
Low	1050	18.8	29.9	781	23.7	28.0	269	11.8	35.3
Medium	3368	60.3	20.9	2048	62.1	16.5	1320	57.8	27.7
High	1164	20.9	14.4	469	14.2	11.5	695	30.4	16.4

Source: our calculation on FOLCSI Survey (2024)

EXPECTED FINDINGS

We expect to find that the risk of being NEET among young people with a migratory background in Italy is shaped by the interplay between gender, migratory generation, and origin. Among first-generation women, family-related factors such as marital status and parenthood are likely to have a strong association with inactivity, reflecting the continuing impact of care responsibilities, traditional gender norms, and family-based migration trajectories (Odoardi et al., 2023; Zanfrini & Giuliani, 2023). For first-generation men, by contrast, social and relational factors—particularly perceived discrimination, weak social ties, and limited access to support networks—are expected to weigh more heavily, especially in contexts of labour market precariousness and restricted upward mobility (Brinbaum, 2023).

Among the second generation, gender disparities are expected to be less pronounced, as their educational and employment patterns increasingly resemble those of the native population. In this group, the probability of being NEET is expected to depend primarily on human capital, parental socio-economic resources, and the strength of social support networks. Higher levels of education and family resources are anticipated to reduce the risk of disengagement, while weak support networks may still limit access to opportunities.

Finally, we expect significant variations by origin and migration history. In groups with a tradition of female labour migration, such as those concentrated in domestic and care work, women may display higher employment rates but in low-paid and insecure jobs, whereas in groups marked by family-based migration, inactivity is more likely linked to household and care responsibilities (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2015).

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