

# **An Empirical Study of Status Exchange through Migrant/Native Marriages in Italy.**

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## **Abstract**

The growth of migrant/native marriages documented in many developed countries is often regarded as an indicator of immigrants' assimilation into host societies. We argue that a close examination of assortative mating patterns in migrant/native marriages is critical for a proper assessment of the link between immigrants' assimilation and intermarriage. Specifically, we test the relevance of the status exchange hypothesis to accounting for mixed marriages in Italy, a context characterised by a sharp increase in intermarriages and a particularly poor socioeconomic integration of immigrants. We provide supportive evidence on status exchange by documenting significant deviations from the 'standard' patterns of positive assortative mating among migrant/native marriages. Exploiting Italian Labour Force Survey and Italian Register of Marriage microdata, we find that migrant/native marriages are more likely when less educated older native men marry better educated younger immigrant women, especially when the latter originate from non-Western countries. Immigrant women are also more likely to marry an Italian man if they are not employed at the moment of marriage. Patterns of assortative mating converge with those prevailing among native couples when immigrant women possess Italian citizenship at the moment of marriage, confirming the greater importance of status exchange when immigrants' integration is low.

**Keywords:** Immigration, Marriage, Status exchange, Assortative mating, Intermarriage

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## **Introduction**

Immigrant status and ethnicity are considered significant social boundaries in couple formation because of individuals' preferences regarding the joint consumption of ethnic-related household public goods (Becker, 1981; Lam, 1988; Furtado, 2012) and because of the persistence of negative attitudes between groups (Kalmijn, 1998; Potarca and Mills, 2012). For these reasons, crossing ethnic and national-origin boundaries in marriage is often regarded as a signal of increased integration (or, assimilation)<sup>i</sup> of ethnic minorities and immigrants in a society (Gordon, 1964; Alba and Nee, 2003). Adopting this 'assimilation perspective', a large body of empirical studies interpret the rising rates of migrant/native marriages (henceforth also 'intermarriages' or 'mixed marriages') as resulting from increased societal openness and integration in Western countries (Rosenfeld, 2002; Adserà and Ferrer, 2014).

We question this straightforward interpretation, arguing that while the growth of intermarriages can be 'revealing [of] the declining social distance between the majority and certain minority groups, [it] can also entail a complex co-mingling of economic and social integration and marginalisation' (Song, 2009: 343). Contrary to the research on interethnic marriages, most of the extant research on migrant/native marriages has focused on the growth rates of such unions while largely neglecting the question of whether — and how — immigrant status affects the way in which natives and immigrant individuals are sorted into marital unions (Rosenfeld, 2002; Adserà e Ferrer, 2014). We argue that the assortative mating patterns of migrant/native marriages are instead critical for shedding further light on the mechanisms linking immigrants' assimilation and intermarriage in host societies.

A long research tradition on assortative mating has pointed out the salience of educational homogamy (Mare, 1991; Blau, 1994; Blossfeld and Timm, 2003) and a limited age difference between partners (Shehan et al., 1991) in couple formation. If migrant/native marriages were characterised by

significant deviations from these 'standard' patterns, this would imply that the straightforward assimilation hypothesis only tells part of the story. Particularly when the socioeconomic integration of immigrants is scant, a mechanism of *status exchange* can be proposed as a theoretical account of intermarriages. The concept of status exchange in the mating process was first introduced by Davis (1941) and Merton (1941), who, on the basis of the Indian Hindu caste system, proposed a theoretical account of marriage patterns between blacks (the low-caste) and whites (the high-caste) in the US. The basic idea was that blacks with low socioeconomic status would have hardly ever married whites with high socioeconomic status, but blacks with high socioeconomic status might occasionally marry whites with low socioeconomic status, using their higher status to compensate the white partner for the perceived loss of social standing.

Status exchange theory builds upon the assumption of different social standings of members of different groups (in our case immigrants and natives). Consistently with this theory, natives and immigrants may perceive crossing national-origin boundaries in marriage quite differently. Whereas the former may perceive it as a loss of status, or a disutility, immigrants may see it as an opportunity for material gain and improvement of their socioeconomic prospects. Consequently, partners may be prone to 'trade' some of their valuable traits so that high-ranked members of the immigrant population exchange their status by marrying low-ranked members of the native population. Therefore, we expect members of mixed marriages to deviate from the standard pattern of assortative mating based on educational homogamy and a limited age difference between the spouses.

To test this hypothesis, we investigate marriages between immigrant women and native men in Italy. This country is a new destination of international immigration and has received, since the early 2000s, significant and highly feminised flows of immigrants, especially from Eastern European countries. Italy is also characterised by a particularly difficult socioeconomic integration of immigrants,

most notably women, who display rather poor economic conditions and have quite precarious legal status (Sciortino, 2004; Reyneri and Fullin, 2011). Nonetheless, official statistics show that marriages between native men and immigrant women have increased at unprecedented rates in recent years, rising from less than 3% in 1996 to 7.9% of total celebrated marriages in 2012 (ISTAT, 2013). Taken together, these patterns stand in apparent contrast with a full-fledged process of assimilation and provide an opportunity to test the validity of the status exchange theory. To this end, we analyse both stock and flow microdata on marriages that we derived from the Italian Labor Force Survey (ILFS, 2005-2012) and from the Italian Register of Marriages (IRM, 2005-2012). The latter contains exceptionally high-quality and rich information on all marriages celebrated yearly in Italy, and it has never previously been used to study intermarriages. Both data sources enable us to investigate national-origin variations in the patterns of marital sorting in terms of partners' education, age and occupational status at marriage. It is thus possible to study the extent to which the mechanisms underlying the formation of migrant/native marriages change according to the level of cultural and socioeconomic integration of the immigrant groups. Although our study does not include group-level indicators of integration, all analyses are conducted separately by immigrant women's national origins and thus account for variation in models of migration as well as linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Importantly, we are also able to study possible variations by citizenship of the bride. Finally, we consider both native men's and immigrant women's perspectives by contrasting migrant/native mating patterns with those observed among both 'two-natives' and 'two-immigrants' unions.

## **1 Marital Sorting in Migrant/Native Unions: a Status Exchange Approach**

### ***1.1 The link between intermarriage and assimilation: assortative mating as an interpretative key***

This article merges two research streams concerned with marital union formation: research on intermarriage, and research on assortative mating. Social scientists have long studied the determinants of exogamy by focusing on marriages that cross ethnic lines (Kalmijn, 1998), and they have recently turned their attention to migrant/native marriages (Adserà and Ferrer, 2014, Kulu and González-Ferrer, 2014). Besides structural constraints, like the size and the sex ratio in the immigrant population (Kalmijn, 1998; Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011), endogamous marriages prevail over exogamous ones also because of tastes and preferences. Individuals may prefer to marry within their national or ethnic group because returns from marriage also derive from the joint consumption of ethnic-related public goods produced within the household, such as language, cuisine, religion and traditions (Becker, 1981; Lam, 1988; Furtado, 2012). Moreover, individuals both belonging to the majority or the minority – and especially the older (Song, 2009) and lower-educated (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007) ones – tend to avoid breaking the norm for endogamy (Kalmijn, 1993b; Jones and Luijckx, 1996) because they are concerned about potential sanctions applied by third parties (Kalmijn, 1998). Research has also investigated the determinants of exogamy. As marriage probably constitutes the highest degree of intimacy between individuals, and considering the above-mentioned existence of cultural barriers to exogamy, intermarriage is often regarded as the maximal marker of immigrants' assimilation (Gordon, 1964; Kalmijn, 1998). The empirical evidence on the micro-level determinants of intermarriage supports this ‘assimilation hypothesis’ because it shows that immigrants who are culturally and socioeconomically integrated in the host countries – e.g. those who migrated at young ages or were born in the host country, or those that are better educated and with higher language skills – are the most likely to intermarry (González-Ferrer, 2006; Dribe and Lundh, 2011; Adserà and Ferrer, 2014).

Research on the determinants of exogamy does not entail any precise prediction on how mixed couples are sorted. To advance our knowledge on migrant/native marriages, this stream of research can

be complemented with research on assortative mating based on education and age. Highly-educated immigrants have wider social networks and are more likely to accept the cultural norms prevailing in the host country. They therefore are more interested in similarities in education than similarities in ethnicity (Furtado and Theodoropoulos, 2011). Since preferences for partners' characteristics are shaped during early adulthood and in the context where individuals grew up, the criteria adopted for mate selection among early-age and second-generation migrants should be more similar to those adopted by the natives, compared with first generation migrants (Adserà and Ferrer, 2014). Therefore, both among native and mixed couples we should observe the 'standard' patterns of educational and age positive assortative mating that have been documented by a number of studies (Mare, 1991; Shehan et al., 1991; Blau, 1994; Blossfeld and Timm, 2003).

However, poorly-integrated immigrants – e.g., first-generation migrants belonging to disadvantaged national groups – may perceive intermarriage as a gateway to socioeconomic integration and stability in the host society. In turn, natives, especially when low-educated, may consider crossing national-origin boundaries in marriage as a loss of status. Consistently with a status exchange approach, the former may be prone to trade some of their valuable resources (like education and age) in exchange for increased stability and well-being, while the latter may seek partners with 'valuable resources' as a compensation.

To be stressed is that intermarriage *as a consequence* of immigrant integration into host societies is not necessarily a contradiction of status exchange, which interprets intermarriage *as a driver* of immigrant integration. Even in the presence of reduced boundaries between immigrants and natives, marrying an older and less-educated native spouse could still contribute to immigrants' socioeconomic integration through the spillover of human capital and increased access to information on labour market opportunities. Our point, however, is different and not in contrast with this statement;

for we surmise that, conditional on observed intermarriages, the lower the degree of immigrants' assimilation, the greater the likelihood of observing differences in marriage patterns in the direction predicted by the status exchange theory. The idea that mating patterns constitute an interpretative key with which to assess the nature of the link between the growth of intermarriages and assimilation can be found in Kalmijn (1993a). The increase in black/white intermarriages in the U.S. could be plausibly due to a continuous decline in white prejudice against blacks, as well as a decline in residential and occupational segregation. However, Kalmijn pointed out that these changes had been rather too slow, in the time span considered, to explain on their own the strong increase in intermarriages. As a way to solve this 'puzzle', he suggested considering that the nature of these marriages 'remained traditional in the sense that racial caste prestige and socioeconomic prestige still function as substitutes in the selection process' (Kalmijn, 1993a: 142).

### ***1.2 Previous findings on status exchange in interethnic and migrant/native marriages***

Empirical support for the status exchange hypothesis has been provided in the above-mentioned work by Kalmijn (1993a), who found that black women are much more likely to marry down, with respect to education, when they marry white men rather than black men. Similarly, white men have higher chances of marrying up when they marry black women rather than white women. Fu (2001) enriched the picture by claiming not only that the pattern of racial intermarriage pairings is different relative to endogamous marriages, but also that a 'racial hierarchy' still exists in the U.S., given that the differences between exogamous and endogamous pairings only pertain to whites marrying blacks and Mexican Americans, but not Japanese Americans.

Rosenfeld argued that several shortcomings may affect the above-mentioned empirical evidence supporting the theory of status exchange in interethnic marriages in the U.S. (2005, 2010). First, the

results may be partly driven by the selection of couples in their twenties, which is problematic since (black) husbands tend to be some years older than (white) women and the latter may be still in the educational system at the time of marriage. Second, the main conclusions supporting status exchange would be easily contradicted by a few changes in the specification and assumptions of log-linear models. Both these aspects will be considered in the methodological section of the paper. Empirical results contrary to the status exchange hypothesis have been also found in the Netherlands (Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2006).

While the evidence for status exchange in interethnic marriages is mixed, results on migrant/native marriages seem more robust. This is not surprising, since the potential material gains deriving from crossing ethnic lines are higher for immigrants than for native members of ethnic minorities. Choi et al. (2012) confirmed that educational differences between spouses in mixed couples are larger than those observed among native couples in Australia and the U.S. Empirical evidence supportive of the status exchange hypothesis in mixed marriages is available also for Spain, a new destination country for international migration like Italy (Cortina Trilla, Esteve, and Domingo, 2008).

Education is not the only relevant socioeconomic characteristic that may be part of the 'bargaining' that takes place in the mating process between migrants and natives. A younger age, especially for women, may also be important as a proxy for physical attractiveness, given the prevalence of a 'double standard of aging' (Sontag, 1979), and a higher likelihood of having children. As far as men are concerned, older age can be seen as an indicator of achieved socioeconomic status and financial stability (Skopek, Schmitz, and Blossfeld, 2011b). As in the case of education, the literature suggests a normative preference for similarly aged individuals to marry each other (Shehan et al. 1991). Although there is some evidence for age imbalance in mixed marriages in favour of the native partner (Glowsky, 2007; Haandrikman, 2013), age differences within the couple have not



received much attention in the literature on status exchange. However, individuals' age at marriage, especially on the side of the native men, may be of great importance in the Italian setting, as discussed in the next section.

## **2 Status Exchange in Migrant/Native Marriages in the Italian Setting**

### ***2.1 Mixed Marriages From the Perspective of Foreign-Born Women***

The importance of status exchange in accounting for mixed marriages in Italy is suggested by the prevalence of a clear gender and national-origin pattern. The rise of mixed marriages concerned mainly couples consisting of a native man married to a foreign-born woman, mostly originating from poorer countries in Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, in Latin America (ISTAT, 2013). In 2012, eight out of ten mixed marriages were contracted between an Italian man and an immigrant woman. The first ten nationalities of the brides involved in these marriages were Romania (17.4%), Ukraine (10.9%), Brazil (7.2%), Russia (6.3%), Poland (5.3%), Albania (4.7%), Moldova (4.6%), Morocco (3.3%), Peru (2.5%) and Ecuador (2.3%).

This gender and national-origin composition is largely a consequence of recent migration inflows from Eastern European countries. Romania (20.6%), Albania (11.1%), Ukraine (4.4%), Moldova (3.3%) and Poland (2.1%) were the first five foreign European countries represented in Italy in 2012, and altogether they had increased from less than 30% of the total foreign population in 2004 to more than 40% in 2012. Apart from Albania, women are largely over-represented within all the national groups mentioned.

The feminisation of migration inflows from Eastern Europe can be attributed to migration chains which fostered the specialisation of Eastern European countries as 'senders' of workers in the household services' sector – a feature shared by some Southern American countries such as Ecuador,

Peru and Brazil (Sciortino, 2004; Bettio, Simonazzi, and Villa, 2006; Reyneri and Fullin, 2011). Migrant women working in the household services' sector are more likely to hold irregular status and are often employed in low-paid occupations in the underground economy (ibid.).

The characteristics of recent migration inflows in Italy suggest that immigrant women may gain specific advantages from marrying an Italian man, and that some national groups, most notably Eastern-European women, have the highest potential returns from such mating. Highly-educated immigrants, who possess the cultural resources with which to overcome social norms on ethnic endogamy and better relational skills – including higher language proficiency – should have the highest chances to exploit mixed marriages as potential means of upward social mobility (Kalmijn, 1998; Furtado, 2012). The prospect of obtaining Italian/EU citizenship is potentially crucial in explaining why high-educated immigrant women may accept to marry less-educated older Italian men. Even if migrants manage to enter Italy legally, they often revert to irregular status because of difficulties in finding stable employment. Irregular status heavily compromises the likelihood of obtaining eligibility for naturalisation, because the Italian nationality law requires ten years of uninterrupted residence for non-EU migrants (Kosic and Triandafyllidou, 2003).<sup>ii</sup>

In light of the marked heterogeneity of the immigrant population, we may expect to observe different patterns of status exchange in mixed marriages in Italy. Firstly, compared with Eastern-European women, those from Western countries are culturally more similar to native Italian men, enjoy better socioeconomic conditions, and often they do not need intermarriage to acquire EU citizenship, since in most cases they are already EU citizens (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011). Therefore, status exchange should be less important in mixed marriages involving women originating from Western countries, and such couples should exhibit a more similar age and educational makeup compared with native ones. Status exchange may also be less intense in mixed marriages involving Latin American

women and native Italian men. This may depend on several mechanisms, ranging from a higher level of cultural integration due to language proximity and longer migration history, and easier access to Italian/EU citizenship because of Italian ancestry.

## ***2.2 Mixed Marriages from the Perspective of Italian Men***

Although most of the advantages of intermarriage seem to accrue to the immigrant women who manage to settle down in the host country (Serret, 2011), we maintain that a specific segment of the Italian male population, as defined by education and age, may also have a strong propensity towards exogamous marriage. It can be argued that immigrant women represent a sort of 'secondary' marriage market for low-educated Italian men who find it increasingly difficult to marry an Italian woman. As a consequence, the data on mixed unions show that the age at marriage of native men tends to be higher than in native unions (ISTAT, 2013).

This would be the result of three social processes common to all Western countries: a) the outnumbering of men by women among the tertiary educated (Buchmann and DiPrete, 2006; for Italy, Pisati, 2002); b) the increasing prevalence over time of educational homogamy at higher levels of education (Blossfeld and Timm, 2003; Schwartz and Mare, 2005; for Italy, Bernardi, 2002); c) the existence of gendered propensities to educationally heterogamous marriages, and more precisely the fact that whereas men accept down-marriage, women do not. Especially in a male-breadwinner setting like the Italian one, women may still prefer men at least as educated as they are, even if they have gained high levels of economic independence (Bernardi, 2002; Blossfeld and Timm, 2003). More generally, Skopek, Schulz, and Blossfeld (2011a) found that women, differently from men, are reluctant to contact men who are less educated even on an online dating platform, suggesting that women place more value on establishing a joint lifestyle and sharing cultural interests.

### **2.3 Research Hypotheses**

Based on the theoretical framework outlined in previous sections, it is possible to summarise our hypotheses as follows:

H1a: *the likelihood of a native man being married to an immigrant rather than a native woman is highest among those couples in which the wife is more educated than the husband, especially when the husband is low-educated and the wife is high-educated;*

H1b: *symmetrically, the likelihood of an immigrant woman being married to a native man rather than an immigrant man is highest among those couples in which the wife is more educated than the husband, especially when the wife is high-educated and the husband is low-educated;*

H2: *hypotheses H1a and H1b hold true mostly when the husband married at an older age;*

H3: *hypotheses H1a and H1b apply only to migrant/native marriages involving women originating from poorer countries and facing higher socioeconomic instability in the host country (i.e. women born in Eastern European and, to a lesser extent, Latin American countries).*

### **3 Data and Methods**

To test our research hypotheses we relied on two data sources: the Italian Labour Force Survey (ILFS) and the Italian Register of Marriages (IRM). These two datasets share a set of features which enabled us to carry out comparable analyses. At the same time, they are also quite distinct from each other in terms of their reference population and the way in which intermarriage is measured. More precisely, the ILFS provides estimates of the *stock* of marriages because it furnishes information on the marital

status of individuals interviewed in the years 2005-2012 and who got married from the 1990s onwards. Instead, the IRM contains the full record of marriages celebrated yearly (*flows*) in Italy in the years 2005-2012, and therefore in the period of the maximum frequency of intermarriages. We consider that these differences give additional robustness to our results.

The two datasets have pros and cons that make them complementary to our purposes. IRM is based on a much larger number of observations and on population rather than survey data. Moreover, contrary to the ILFS data, it is not affected by the potential problem of selection bias due to divorces and their differing incidence across types of couples. Moreover, because IRM provides flow data, it makes it possible to implement additional analyses on the role played by citizenship and labour market position at the moment of marriage. On the other hand, IRM has the major limitation of being based only on marriages celebrated in Italy, thereby impeding a reliable comparison of the mating patterns between mixed marriages and marriages involving two foreign partners, which are often celebrated outside Italy.

Beyond these differences, a significant set of characteristics are shared by the two datasets. Both ILFS and IRM data make it possible to combine key information on all household components and therefore analyse how couples in Italy are assorted according to education, country of birth, and age at marriage. Our main interest centred on a precise type of couple consisting of an Italian-native husband (defined as having Italian citizenship and being born in Italy) and a foreign-born wife. We restricted our analyses to individuals aged between 25 and 54. The lower age bound made it possible to avoid including individuals still in the education system (Rosenfeld, 2005). Differently from the works cited in the review of the literature, we did not consider all possible combinations of gender and national groups because mixed marriages involving a native woman and a foreign-born man and marriages between immigrants of different nationalities are very rare in Italy. We focused on unions

based on marriage, since in our theoretical framework marriage is crucial in the social exchange between partners because immigrants can acquire Italian/EU citizenship through marriage.<sup>iii</sup>

We used place of birth instead of citizenship as the main identification criterion for immigrant women because marriage with an Italian man is by far the main gateway to Italian nationality for foreign-born women in Italy. Since ILFS data do not contain any information regarding the reason for citizenship acquisition, nor the year when citizenship was acquired, it was not possible to isolate the minority, among foreign-born women, who had acquired Italian citizenship after a long period of residence. Nonetheless, we carried out specific tests for the role played by citizenship at the time of marriage by exploiting the IRM data.

Both datasets comprise detailed information on women's country of origin. We grouped immigrant women into four groups. The Eastern European group consists mainly of Romanian, Polish, Albanian, Moldovan and Russian women. The main nationalities represented in the Western group are Swiss, German and French.<sup>iv</sup> Within the Latin American group the most represented nationalities are Brazilian, Cuban, Argentine, Venezuelan, Colombian, and Ecuadorian. This classification was constructed with the intention of grouping countries according to their models of migration, as well as linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, it shall be acknowledged that this intention was constrained by the small numbers available in the ILFS. For this reason, we also had to group all other nationalities in a residual category, and their results are never shown in the paper.<sup>v</sup> In some analyses we merged Eastern Europeans and Latin Americans into a single group as opposed to the group of the Westerners because the former exhibit common patterns of mixed marriages.

We broke our sample down into three educational groups. High-educated individuals are those who had acquired a tertiary degree; medium-educated are those who had completed upper-secondary education; and low-educated are those individuals who had not continued their education beyond

lower-secondary school. We modelled the probability of mixed marriage for all possible combinations of partners' educational levels, consistently with our interpretative framework and hypotheses. For the sake of simplicity and due to small numbers, in some of the analyses we did not include all combinations but employed a reduced measure of the educational makeup of the couple: couples in which the two partners have the same educational level (educationally homogamous couples); couples in which the wife has less education than the husband; couples in which the wife has higher education than the husband.

Regarding age at marriage, the ILFS provides information on the year when the marriage was celebrated. Unfortunately, individuals' ages are available only in 5-year classes. Therefore, husbands' and wives' age at marriage variables were approximated with a margin of error of  $\pm 2.5$  years. IRM data enabled us to overcome this limitation.

Our analytical approach adopts a two-way perspective to account for potential gender variation in the propensity to enter a mixed marriage consisting of an Italian man and a foreign-born woman. First, we assessed Italian men's likelihood of being married to an immigrant woman relative to a native-Italian one; and, second, we assess immigrant women's likelihood of being married to an Italian man relative to a man of their own national group. Our first set of analyses (section 4.1, see Table 1 for detailed sample sizes) assesses the probability of mixed marriage by educational level of both spouses and nationality group of the wife. Reported in section 4.2 are models augmented with three-way interactions between both partners' educational attainment and age at marriage of the husband, net of that of the wife. As already acknowledged above, IMR data do not allow this double-perspective analyses, so that we limited our analysis to marriages between Italian men and immigrant women (see Table 1 for the number of observations employed in the analyses presented in section 4.3).

[Table 1 about here]

Our empirical analyses are based on binomial and multinomial logistic regressions rather than log-linear models, as is common in the literature on status exchange (Kalmijn, 1993a; Fu, 2001; Choi et al., 2012). The above-described two-way perspective allows detailed study of whether mixed marriages deviate from native ones in terms of educational and age patterns, avoiding the risk of choosing an inadequate log-linear model specification (Rosenfeld, 2005, 2010).<sup>vi</sup> For instance, we might find that Italian men are more likely to be married to a non-Western woman than to an Italian one when he is old and low-educated and she is high-educated. However, this could be due, not to status exchange, but rather to the fact that age and educational assortative mating work differently across national groups (ibid.). By focusing also on the perspective of immigrant women we could control whether the latter tend to marry down and accept a wide age-gap even when they select a man from their own national group.

The results are presented in the form of log-odds and predicted probabilities. We opted for the former measure in the main analyses on educational assortative mating because we are interested in modeling relative risks rather than conditional probabilities. The results of models including interaction terms between the educational sorting of the couple and husband's age at marriage are based on predicted probabilities, because they are more easily understandable. All models included year and region fixed effects, the latter to control for features of local marriage markets. Given that mixed marriages are over-represented in Central and Northern regions, we ran additional analyses (not shown here but available upon request) stratified by area of residence (Centre-North vs. South and islands), which yielded qualitatively similar results.



## 4 Results

### *4.1 Comparing Partners' Educational Sorting in Native and Mixed Marriages*

The top panel of Figure 1 shows log-odds and 95% confidence intervals obtained from a multinomial logistic regression conducted to study Italian men's likelihood of marrying an immigrant woman rather than an Italian one by the educational sorting of the couple.<sup>vii</sup>

[Figure 1 about here]

Overall, mixed marriages display systematic deviations relative to the standard pattern of educational assortative mating found for both native and migrant marriages (Figure 1). The results support hypothesis H1a that mixed marriages in Italy are more likely to happen when the wife has more education than the husband. Moreover, the highest chances of mixed marriage are found for the particular combination of a low-educated Italian man married to a high-educated immigrant woman. High-educated Italian men, who have a strong position on the native marriage market, display very low chances of being married to a foreign-born woman, regardless of her education. Conversely, low-educated men have higher chances of being married to a foreign-born woman, but only if the latter is high-educated. Consistently with our H3, this divergence from the standard pattern of educational assortative mating is especially pronounced among unions involving Eastern-European women, while marriages between Italian men and Western women are the most similar, in terms of partners' educational make-up, to those celebrated between two native-Italian partners. The same conclusions are reached when modeling mixed marriages from the immigrant women's perspective (bottom panel of Figure 1). Foreign-born women from Eastern Europe, and to a lesser extent women from Latin America, are more likely to enter unions with an Italian man than with a man of their own national group if they are high-educated and he is low-educated.

Two additional findings of the analyses carried out from women's perspective should be underlined. First, the educational sorting of mixed marriages involving Western women is quite similar to marriages between both native partners, thus suggesting that status exchange is less important for women from this national group, as compared with the other national groups, when marrying an Italian man. This is consistent with the idea that the lower the cultural distance and the higher the socioeconomic integration of a migrant group, the more similar are the criteria adopted by natives and migrants when selecting a partner.

A second result relates to East-European women only. It points out that the likelihood of East-European women marrying an Italian man, relative to a co-national man, is always higher when she is high-educated than when she is not, regardless of the man's education. This is consistent with the idea that, when the cultural distance between immigrants and natives is high, education can be seen as a proxy for a looser dependence on the ethnic group of belonging as well as for the cultural and linguistic skills needed to marry across ethnic boundaries (see section 2.1).

One potential criticism of our results might concern compositional bias – i.e. the higher frequency of mixed marriages involving a low-educated Italian man and a high-educated Eastern-European woman would be a consequence of the fact that East-European women are, on average, more educated than Italian ones. However, some counter-arguments reduce the potential relevance of the compositional effect. First, results are shown in terms of relative risks (log-odds) precisely to avoid taking marginal distributions into account. More importantly, if mixed unions involving Italian men and East-European women are more likely to show a wide educational advantage in favour of the woman simply because East-European women are, on average, more educated than Italian ones, then we should observe (in the top panel of Figure 1) positive effects of wife's education on the chances of mixed marriage independently of Italian men's education. In fact, we found that it is mostly the specific

combination of a high-educated woman married to a low-educated man that drives the formation of these unions. Finally, the same educational patterns in mixed marriages hold when we analyse these unions from both men's and women's perspectives, thus furnishing further support for our interpretation that the educational matching that we found is a consequence of a status exchange mechanism.

#### ***4.2 Husbands' Age at Marriage and its Interaction with Spouses' Education***

In this section, we provide further evidence that mixed marriages also deviate from endogamous marriages when it comes to age similarity of the two spouses.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 shows predicted probabilities of Italian men being married to a immigrant woman according to their age at marriage. We grouped Eastern-European and Latin American women due to small sample sizes and because they showed similar age patterns. As expected, the higher the husband's age at marriage, the stronger his propensity to marry an immigrant woman (top panel in Figure 2). Consistently with our hypotheses H2 and H3, this pattern is found only with regard to unions involving non-Western women, and even more so among couples in which the wife has more education than the husband.<sup>viii</sup>

Hence, the higher probability of low- and medium-educated men marrying high-educated non-Western migrant women shown in Figure 1 is almost entirely due to an over-representation of those combinations among couples in which the husband got married after the age of 35. This result confirms hypothesis H2 and is consistent with the idea that intermarriage is a second-best choice for low-educated men who face difficulties in finding a partner within the native marriage market. It should be noted that the higher age of Italian men may be a consequence of the fact that intermarriages are often second marriages for them (ISTAT, 2013). However, this does not alter the interpretation of our results;

rather, it further confirms the idea that low-educated Italian men tend to marry an immigrant woman as a consequence of difficulties faced in the native marriage market, which may include difficulties both in entering and remaining in a stable union with a native woman.

The bottom panel of Figure 2 shows how immigrant women's probability of being married to an Italian man relates to their husband's age at marriage. The results confirm that the older the man, the higher the non-Western immigrant woman's likelihood of being married to a native-Italian man, but this holds especially for couples in which the woman marries down. Women from Western countries have an around 90 percent probability of being married to an Italian man, and there are no differences in the age patterns between these mixed marriages and native ones.

#### ***4.3 The Role of Women's Citizenship and Occupation at the Moment of Marriage***

In this section we use IRM data to study the extent to which immigrant women's possession of the Italian citizenship and occupational status at the moment of marriage affect mixed marriage patterns. Naturalisation does not automatically imply successful integration (Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul, 2008). However, in a context like the Italian one (see section 2.1), it is possible to assume that those immigrant women who have acquired citizenship for reasons other than marriage with a native are likely to be more socioeconomically integrated than those without citizenship. Hence, based on our theoretical arguments, we should not observe major deviations in the patterns of marital sorting when comparing mixed marriages in which the immigrant woman was already an Italian citizen at the moment of marriage with native unions. Table 2 presents results of two multinomial logistic regressions. The first model (M1) replicates ILFS analyses presented in Fig. 1 by studying the chances of Italian men of being married to immigrant women of different national origin, irrespectively of

citizenship possession. The second model (M2) differs only in that it restricts the sample to those immigrant women who were already Italian citizens at the moment of marriage.

[Table 2 about here]

The first two columns of Table 2 present the results concerning the relative chances of Italian men marrying an Eastern European woman *vs.* an Italian one. As in previous models, the combination consisting of a low-educated husband and a high-educated wife maximises the chances of intermarriage (column 1). However, conditional on possession of Italian citizenship (column 2), the overall distances between the coefficients related to the different educational combinations reduce dramatically. The same holds true in the case of mixed marriages involving a Latin American woman (columns 3 and 4). In the latter case, the predictive power of different educational match-ups almost completely disappears when the woman is an Italian citizen. When the woman originates from a Western country, we do not see major deviations, except for the fact that the combinations that maximise the chances of this kind of mixed marriage are those in which she is high-educated. Again, differences between educational combinations substantially reduce if the Western woman was an Italian citizen at the moment of marriage.

Also partners' age makes much less of a difference when the immigrant woman possessed Italian citizenship at the moment of marriage. For instance, the positive, non-linear effect of men's age at marriage on the chances of marrying a Latin American or a Western woman virtually disappears. The same holds true when considering the negative, non-linear effect of women's age at marriage on the chances of Italian men marrying an Eastern-European woman. These results suggest that mixed marriages between two Italian citizens are much more similar, in terms of marital sorting, to native ones than they are to mixed marriages in which the immigrant woman is a non-citizen. This can be summarised by the comparison of the overall predictive power of both partners' education and age: The

Pseudo-R2 is about 3% in the model including only citizen women, while it reaches 10% when all immigrant women are considered.

Table 3 shows the results of the same models with the addition of a variable concerning the labour market situation of the spouses.<sup>ix</sup> The results suggest that a non-citizen immigrant woman has very strong incentives to marry an Italian man when she is not employed. However, if the immigrant woman already possesses Italian citizenship, the discriminating role of her employment condition becomes much weaker: the negative effects associated with women's being employed decrease by about 50% in the case of the odds of marrying a Latin American and an Eastern European woman rather than an Italian one; they disappear almost completely when comparing mixed couples involving a Western woman with native ones.

[Table 3 about here]

It is also interesting to note that men's labour market position plays a comparatively much smaller role, and that the pattern of the effects of partners' education are not substantially altered when the labour market variable is included. These results point to a direct role of education, besides the role of economic resources, as a valuable feature taken into account by the partners in the mating process.

## **Summary and Discussion**

Many theoretical and empirical studies present the growth of mixed marriages as a result of the successful assimilation of immigrants into the host societies (Song, 2009; Adserà and Ferrer, 2014). In this paper, we have argued that a proper assessment of the assimilation hypothesis would benefit if theories on intermarriage were complemented by theories on assortative mating. Indeed, the existence of significant deviations from the 'standard' patterns of positive educational and age assortative mating would be indicative of a status exchange mechanism which we surmised to be negatively associated

with the degree of immigrants' assimilation. Unfortunately, studies that combine theories on intermarriage and assortative mating in order to provide such an assessment are rather scarce.

By focusing on marriages consisting of an immigrant woman and a native man in Italy, our results point to the salience of status exchange as a theoretical account of intermarriages. Importantly, this result is in line with recent empirical evidence coming from other Western countries like Australia, the U.S. (Choi et al., 2012) and Spain (Cortina Trilla, Esteve, and Domingo, 2008).

We detected substantial deviations from the patterns of marital sorting prevalent among endogamous marriages for mixed marriages involving East-European and Latin-American women. Within intermarriages of this type, less educated older Italian men and more educated immigrant women are largely over-represented compared with endogamous marriages. Deviations from positive assortative mating are stronger if the immigrant woman does not possess Italian citizenship and if she is not employed at the moment of marriage. Consistently with findings in the literature, high-educated women from non-Western countries have the highest chances of marrying exogamously compared with their less educated counterparts, and they may accept to marry down if they foresee material gains such as acquisition of Italian/EU citizenship. In turn, the propensity of low-educated Italian men to marry exogamously may be a consequence of a crowding-out mechanism in the native marriage market. On the other hand, we found that when immigrant women are well integrated into the host society – e.g. women born in Western countries or those who acquired Italian citizenship before marriage – the criteria for mate selection do not differ much from those relative to marriages between two natives. In this respect, a limitation of this article is that we did not take into account direct measures of immigrants' cultural and socioeconomic integration – e.g. language skills and length of residence, both at the individual and group levels. However, the moderating role of immigrant women's country of origin and citizenship possession on the likelihood to observe status exchange supports our hypothesis

that the latter is more likely when intermarriages involve women belonging to less integrated immigrant groups.

A second limitation of this study is that, although the status exchange theory provides clear predictions that we were able to corroborate empirically, any attempt to establish mechanisms generating the patterns of marital sorting among different types of union can only be seen as tentative. More precisely, mixed marriages may be the result of convergence among 'structural' forces operating upon individuals who did not conduct any conscious process of 'bargaining' on partner's valuable characteristics. For example, 'local marriage markets' (Lichter, LeClere, and McLaughlin, 1991) may play a pivotal role in the mating processes. High-educated Eastern European female migrants working in the low-skilled segment of the labour market may not have chances to actually 'choose' between low- and high-educated native men. Their highly precarious socioeconomic integration, coupled with the high feminisation of immigrant flows, may mean that the only options for those women are either to remain single or to marry a low-status Italian man. On the side of men, if our argument concerning crowding-out from the 'primary' marriage market holds, there may be very limited room for older Italian men to select immigrant women according to preferences concerning features such as high education and younger age. A further mechanism potentially able to account for the higher importance of status exchange for some national groups may relate to the differing incidence of so-called 'marriage migration' (Niedomysl, Osth, and van Ham, 2010). Because our data did not contain information on the time of migration, we could not identify 'marriage migrants'. The greater importance of status exchange in mixed marriages involving immigrant women without Italian citizenship would suggest that marriage migration is of importance. This would not be surprising given that marriage migrants obviously experience the lowest level of socioeconomic integration in the host country at the moment of marriage. It should be underlined that identification of these (or alternative) possible scenarios



would not invalidate a theoretical account based on status exchange; rather, they would enrich our knowledge about the specific micro-mechanisms whereby status exchange takes place.

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## TABLES

**Table 1** Distribution of mixed couples by national group.

<i>Italian Labour Force Survey (ILFS) - 2005-2012</i>							
<b>Italian men</b>		<b>East-European women</b>		<b>Latin American women</b>		<b>Western Women</b>	
With an Italian woman	144,698	With an Eastern European man	5,250	With a Latin American man	601	With a Western man	352
With an Eastern European woman	1,364	With an Italian man	1,364	With an Italian man	1,070	With an Italian man	4,408
With a Latin American woman	1,070	Total	6,614	Total	1,671	Total	4,760
With a Western woman	4,408						
Other countries	515						
Total	152,055						
<i>Italian Register on Marriages (IRM)- 2005-2012</i>							
<b>Italian men</b>							
With an Italian woman	1,193,305						
With an Eastern European woman	59,300						
With a Latin American woman	26,533						
With a Western woman	29,038						
Other countries	15,695						
Total	1,323,871						

*Source:* Own elaborations based on the Italian Labor Force Survey (2005-2012) and the Italian Register of Marriages (2005-2012).

**Table 2** Relative risks of Italian men of marrying an immigrant woman by age and educational sorting of the couple (individuals aged 25-54, years 2005-2012).

	Eastern Europe		Latin America		Western	
	M1 <i>W-all</i>	M2 <i>W-Italian citizen</i>	M1 <i>W-all</i>	M2 <i>W-Italian citizen</i>	M1 <i>W-all</i>	M2 <i>W-Italian citizen</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Partners' educational makeup</i>						
Wlow-Hlow (ref.)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wlow-Huppsec	-.029 (.021)	.123 (.085)	<b>.207</b> (.029)	<b>.342</b> (.063)	-.205 (.066)	.108 (.032)
Wlow-Htertiary	<b>-.230</b> (.045)	.312 (.150)	-.119 (.065)	.334 (.122)	.112 (.115)	.100 (.064)
Wuppsec-Hlow	<b>-.162</b> (.016)	-.029 (.067)	<b>-.342</b> (.025)	-.010 (.053)	-.037 (.046)	-.061 (.025)
Wuppsec-Huppsec	<b>-.739</b> (.014)	<b>-.246</b> (.054)	<b>-.706</b> (.021)	.001 (.041)	<b>.167</b> (.035)	<b>-.213</b> (.019)
Wuppsec-Htertiary	<b>-.942</b> (.028)	-.064 (.087)	<b>-.756</b> (.040)	.099 (.066)	<b>.312</b> (.052)	<b>-.198</b> (.035)
Wtertiary-Hlow	<b>.685</b> (.020)	<b>.348</b> (.096)	<b>.549</b> (.031)	<b>.309</b> (.078)	<b>.673</b> (.058)	-.074 (.044)
Wtertiary-Huppsec	<b>-.404</b> (.019)	<b>-.330</b> (.078)	<b>-.504</b> (.029)	.099 (.066)	<b>.574</b> (.040)	<b>-.374</b> (.029)
Wtertiary-Htertiary	<b>-1.018</b> (.020)	<b>-.551</b> (.072)	<b>-1.072</b> (.031)	-.122 (.050)	<b>.859</b> (.035)	<b>-.404</b> (.025)
<i>Husband's age</i>						
Hage	<b>.263</b> (.008)	<b>.147</b> (.031)	<b>.185</b> (.012)	.026 (.023)	<b>.096</b> (.018)	-.015 (.012)
Hage <sup>2</sup>	<b>-.001</b> (.000)	-.000 (.000)	<b>-.001</b> (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.001 (.000)	.000 (.000)
<i>Wife's age</i>						
Wage	<b>-.243</b> (.008)	-.076 (.031)	<b>-.107</b> (.012)	<b>-.116</b> (.023)	<b>.110</b> (.019)	<b>.181</b> (.013)
Wage <sup>2</sup>	<b>.002</b> (.000)	.000 (.000)	<b>.001</b> (.000)	<b>.002</b> (.000)	<b>-.001</b> (.000)	<b>-.002</b> (.000)

M1: **Pseudo-R2: .10**, Log-likelihood: -380843.39, N=1323871

M2: **Pseudo-R2: .03**, Log-likelihood: -171228.13, N=1268443

*Note:* Log-odds obtained from multinomial logistic regressions. Models control for region and year fixed effects. W and H indicate wives' and husbands' characteristics respectively. Results for category "Other countries" not shown. In bold log-odds significant at p<.001.

*Source:* Own elaborations based on the Italian Register of Marriages (2005-2012).

**Table 3** Relative risk of Italian men of marrying an immigrant woman by educational and labour market sorting of the couple (individuals aged 25-54, years 2005-2012).

	Eastern Europe		Latin America		Western	
	M1 <i>W-all</i>	M2 <i>W-Italian citizen</i>	M1 <i>W-all</i>	M2 <i>W-Italian citizen</i>	M1 <i>W-all</i>	M2 <i>W-Italian citizen</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Partners' educational makeup</i>						
Wlow-Hlow (ref.)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wlow-Huppsec	<b>.134</b> (.022)	.193 (.087)	<b>.375</b> (.030)	.399 (.065)	-.112 (.068)	<b>.131</b> (.033)
Wlow-Htertiary	.034 (.046)	.421 (.153)	.161 (.067)	<b>.400</b> (.123)	.186 (.116)	.131 (.065)
Wuppsec-Hlow	<b>.077</b> (.016)	.106 (.068)	-.029 (.026)	.115 (.054)	.144 (.047)	-.052 (.026)
Wuppsec-Huppsec	<b>-.343</b> (.015)	-.043 (.059)	<b>-.225</b> (.023)	<b>.172</b> (.045)	<b>.375</b> (.038)	<b>-.161</b> (.021)
Wuppsec-Htertiary	<b>-.560</b> (.030)	.111 (.093)	<b>-.332</b> (.042)	.224 (.071)	<b>.427</b> (.056)	<b>-.144</b> (.037)
Wtertiary-Hlow	<b>1.005</b> (.021)	<b>.529</b> (.098)	<b>.945</b> (.032)	<b>.469</b> (.079)	<b>.880</b> (.059)	-.055 (.045)
Wtertiary-Huppsec	.064 (.020)	-.081 (.083)	.050 (.031)	<b>.290</b> (.058)	<b>.799</b> (.044)	<b>-.310</b> (.030)
Wtertiary-Htertiary	<b>-.427</b> (.022)	-.268 (.080)	<b>-.388</b> (.034)	.107 (.057)	<b>1.067</b> (.040)	<b>-.321</b> (.028)
<i>Partners' labour market makeup</i>						
Wnoemp-HLow (ref.)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wnoemp-Hmedium	<b>.128</b> (.017)	.170 (.075)	<b>.254</b> (.025)	.143 (.059)	-.068 (.048)	.033 (.029)
Wnoemp-Hhigh	.006 (.024)	.099 (.102)	<b>.134</b> (.034)	<b>.299</b> (.075)	.121 (.058)	<b>.157</b> (.041)
Wemp-Hlow	<b>-1.048</b> (.016)	<b>-.560</b> (.067)	<b>-1.378</b> (.024)	<b>-.559</b> (.051)	<b>-.929</b> (.042)	.039 (.024)
Wemp-Hmedium	<b>-1.331</b> (.016)	<b>-.713</b> (.066)	<b>-1.657</b> (.025)	<b>-.622</b> (.050)	<b>-.847</b> (.039)	<b>-.121</b> (.024)
Wemp-Hhigh	<b>-1.390</b> (.021)	<b>-.629</b> (.077)	<b>-1.708</b> (.032)	<b>-.582</b> (.058)	<b>-.633</b> (.043)	<b>-.115</b> (.029)
M1: <b>Pseudo-R2: .13</b> , Log-likelihood: -367714.21, N=1323871						
M2: <b>Pseudo-R2: .03</b> , Log-likelihood: -170812.06, N=1268443						

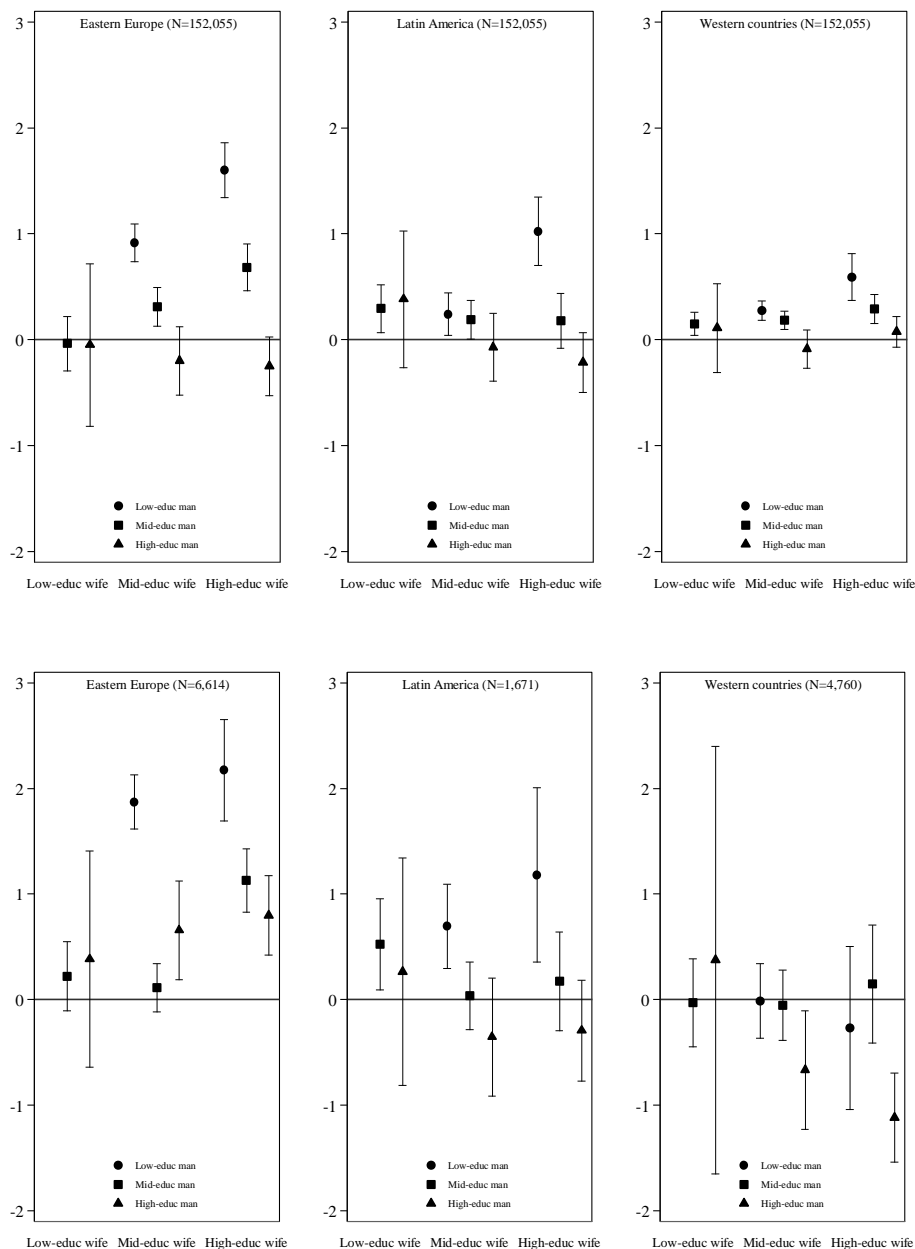
*Note:* Log-odds obtained from multinomial logistic regressions. Models control for husband's and wife's age at marriage, their quadratic forms and interactions, region and year fixed effects. W and H indicate wives' and husbands' characteristics respectively. Results for category "Other countries" not shown. In bold log-odds significant at  $p < .001$ .

*Source:* Own elaborations based on the Italian Register of Marriages (2005-2012).



## FIGURES

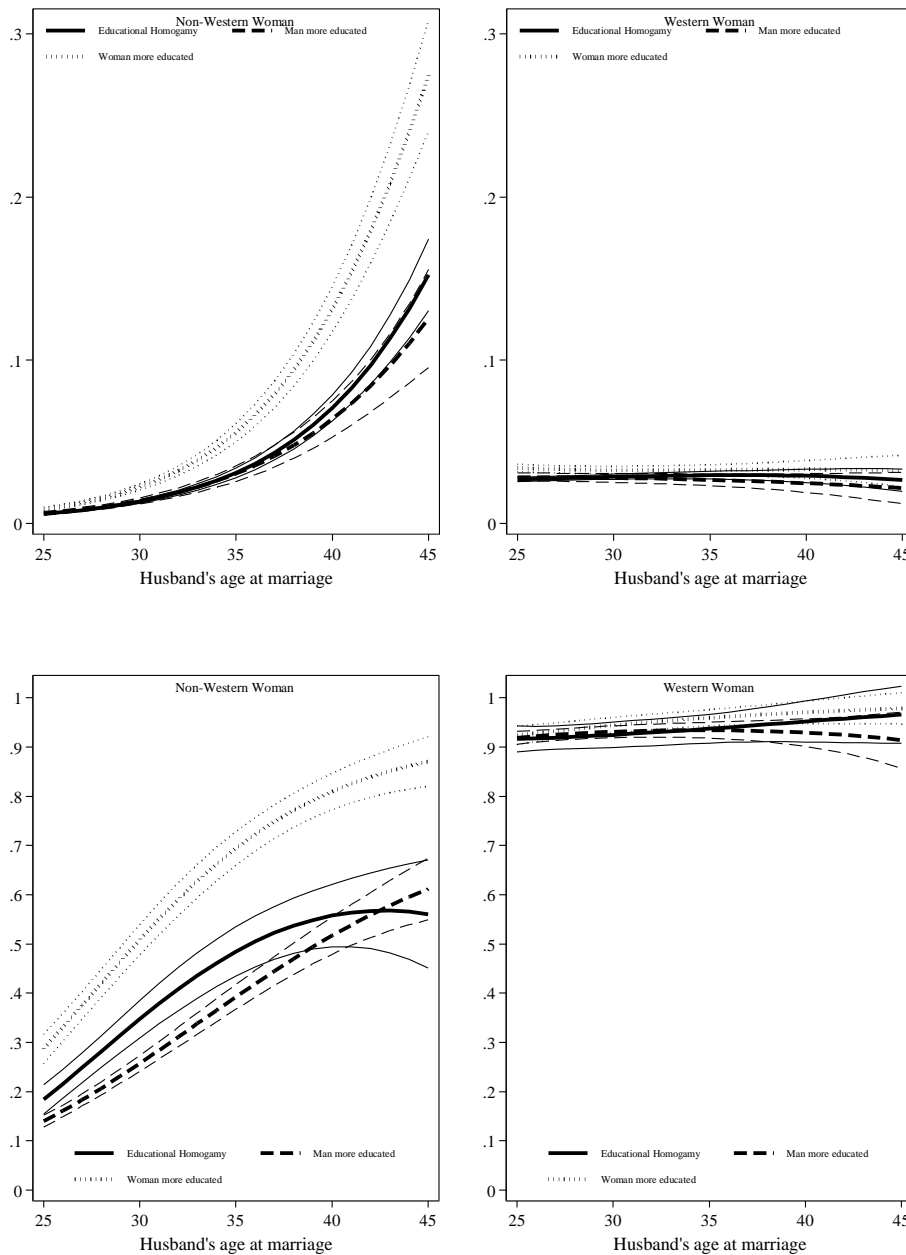
**Figure 1** Relative risks of mixed marriage by educational sorting of the couple (individuals aged 25-54 and resident in Italy, years 2005-2012).



*Note:* Top panel shows log-odds (symbols) and 95 percent confidence intervals (lines) of Italian men being married with an immigrant woman vs. an Italian one, obtained from a multinomial logistic regression. Bottom panel shows the same estimates relative to immigrant women being married with an Italian man vs. a man from the same national group, obtained from three separate logistic regressions. Reference categories are couples made of two low-educated individuals. Models control for husband's and wife's age at marriage, their quadratic forms and interactions, region of residence of the couple and year fixed effects. Sample sizes are in parentheses.

*Source:* Own elaboration based on the Italian Labor Force Survey (2005-2012).

**Figure 2** Probabilities of mixed marriage by husband's age at marriage and educational sorting of the couple (individuals aged 25-54 and resident in Italy, years 2005-2012).



*Note:* Top panel shows predicted probabilities (thick lines) and 95 percent confidence intervals (thin lines) of Italian men being married with an immigrant woman *vs.* an Italian one, obtained from a multinomial logistic regression. Bottom panel shows the same estimates relative to immigrant women being married with an Italian man *vs.* a man of the same national group, obtained from two separate logistic regressions. All models include wife's age at marriage and its quadratic form, region of residence of the couple and year fixed effects.

*Source:* Own elaboration based on the Italian Labor Force Survey (2005-2012).

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<sup>i</sup> We use the terms ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ interchangeably, although we acknowledge the different meanings of assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Alba and Nee, 2003), and we do not assume immigrants' incorporation into a host society to be a straightforward process.

<sup>ii</sup> Before 2006, foreign citizens were entitled to Italian citizenship after six months of residence in Italy following marriage with an Italian citizen. After 2006, two years of residence in the country are required.

<sup>iii</sup> We excluded cohabitations because we did not have information on the year when the cohabitation started. This choice might imply some bias because cohabitation among mixed couples occurs more frequently than among native ones. We replicated the analyses including cohabitations (without the information about the age when the union started) and found that the main results are robust.

<sup>iv</sup> Switzerland, Germany and France were the most common destinations of Italian emigration in the second half of the twentieth century, therefore a large proportion of women in our sample that were born in Western countries might be ‘return migrants’ (Del Boca and Venturini, 2005).

<sup>v</sup> In the ILFS sample, only 515 Italian men are married with women originating from African (337) and Asian (178) countries (see Table 1).

<sup>vi</sup> In addition, log-linear models do not allow the inclusion of continuous variables such as the age at marriage.

<sup>vii</sup> The first symbol from the left in the top panel of Figure 1 represents the relative risk of Italian men being married to an Eastern European woman, rather than an Italian one, when he is middle-educated and she is low-educated, relative to a couple consisting of two low-educated individuals. The same interpretation holds for the bottom panel, in which relative risks of intermarriage are analysed from immigrant women's perspective.

<sup>viii</sup> The effect of women's age at marriage (not shown) is significantly negative but does not vary across educational groups. As mentioned in section 2.2, a wide age-gap within the couple is important not so much because of Italian men's preferences for younger women but because of non-Western migrants' willingness to accept marriage to an older (and less educated) native man.

<sup>ix</sup> Given the need to use a parsimonious variable, we crossed the information concerning whether the wife was employed or not and the kind of profession held by the husband: 'low' for manual workers and unemployed, 'medium' for small self-employed workers and white collars, 'high' for professionals and entrepreneurs. We did not distinguish between unemployed and inactive women because employment status is self-declared in IRM data, and it is not obtained by combining several questions (as in LFS). This has potentially serious consequences on the precision of the classification of inactive and unemployment status, particularly among non-native Italian speaking individuals.