

Article

Integration of Migrants and Protection of Women Rights in Italy

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Abstract

Italy's current migrant integration policies show limited effectiveness in fostering genuine social inclusion, particularly for migrant women who face compounded, intersectional discrimination. Although Italy has adopted international frameworks such as CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention, their implementation remains fragmented and weak. The absence of structured, accessible language courses and personalized integration pathways disproportionately affects migrant women, especially those confined to domestic roles or constrained by cultural barriers. The analysis highlights the Migrant and Inclusive Communities (MeCI) project as an example of a successful local initiative that used technology to enhance linguistic and social inclusion. However, its time-limited nature constrained by temporary funding and local commitment reveals broader systemic failures, including the lack of institutionalization of effective practices and excessive reliance on local actors and short-term funding. The article also stresses the importance of recognizing refugee status through a gender-sensitive lens, acknowledging forms of persecution specific to women. Overall, Italy's integration policies are undermined by the absence of a coherent national strategy, a focus on emergency and security measures, and insufficient long-term planning. The document calls for comprehensive, rights-based, and gender-sensitive policies that prioritize empowerment, participation, and social inclusion.

Keywords: Italy; migration; integration of migrants; gender perspective; women rights

1. Introduction

In Italy, migrant integration policies remain largely formal and struggle to translate into genuine social inclusion. This limitation is particularly evident in the language domain and in the situation of foreign women holding regular residence permits—areas in which integration is frequently entrusted to local practices and grassroots initiatives rather than to structured interventions at the national level. In recent decades, increasing migration flows have posed new challenges to reception and inclusion systems, making it necessary to move beyond a purely bureaucratic conception of integration in order to promote migrants' effective participation in social life.

This article examines the effectiveness of existing integration policies and the capacity of the legal system to foster meaningful integration. It analyses measures adopted at the European, national, and local levels, highlighting their limitations and shortcomings. The study combines a normative legal-policy analysis with a qualitative illustrative case—the MeCI project, an active research initiative conducted between 2019 and 2022—whose interdisciplinary outcomes have been widely recognized as a good practice and discussed in several scholarly publications (see *infra*, Section 5). Particular attention is devoted to the



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situation of migrant women, analysed in light of the main international instruments for the protection of women's rights, such as CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention. Migrant women represent a growing share of the foreign population residing in Italy [1] and experience heightened vulnerability due to intersectional discrimination linked to gender, legal status, origin, and socio-economic condition.

2. The Condition of Migrant Women

At the end of 2024, the foreign resident population in Italy included approximately 2.7 million women, representing 49.8% of the total foreign resident population. This figure reflects a slight decline from 50.9% in 2021 ([1], p. 13). The presence of women varies significantly by nationality; they constitute a large majority among residents from Georgia (85.4%), Russia (79.2%), Ukraine (75.8%), and Moldova (66.4%), while they are a small minority among those from Gambia (5.2%) and Mali (5.8%) ([1], p. 338).

The labour market participation of migrant women in Italy is marked by both significant involvement and persistent structural vulnerabilities ([1], p. 344). In 2024, the employment rate for foreign women aged 15–64 stood at 49.4%, lower than that of Italian women (53.7%). Conversely, the unemployment rate among migrant women was 12.1%, nearly double that of Italian women (6.8%). Migrant women are heavily concentrated in the service sector (81.7% of non-EU permit holders), particularly in domestic and family care work, where they account for 86.3% of all non-EU workers.

Half of the employed foreign women are concentrated in just five occupations—domestic helpers, caregivers, cleaners, waitresses, and social and health workers—reflecting strong occupational segregation. Approximately 36.2% are employed in so-called “vulnerable” jobs, including fixed-term or involuntary part-time contracts. Overqualification is also widespread: in the Lazio region, for instance, 43.1% of foreign workers are overqualified, a phenomenon that disproportionately affects women.

Migrant women are increasingly engaging in self-employment. By the end of 2024, there were 162,245 enterprises led by foreign-born women, representing 24.7% of all immigrant-owned businesses in Italy. Between 2011 and 2024, the number of such enterprises increased by 54.1%, with a strong concentration in the “other services” sector, where women lead 57.0% of migrant-owned firms.

In 2024, women accounted for 26.7% of beneficiaries of the SAI (System of Reception and Integration) network, corresponding to 14,684 individuals. This trend reflects a progressive “feminisation” of the reception system, partly due to the inclusion of vulnerable categories and individuals fleeing the conflict in Ukraine.

Healthcare utilisation patterns also differ. Foreign women from high migration-pressure countries show lower-rate medicalization of childbirth ([1], p. 228). However, they face a higher risk of hospital readmission within 42 days of discharge (1.2% vs. 0.9% for Italian women), likely linked to more precarious living and working conditions ([1], p. 229).

The total fertility rate among foreign women has declined significantly, reaching 1.82 children per woman in 2023, down from a peak of 2.84 in 2004 ([1], p. 102). In the education system, foreign girls and young women play a crucial role: 70.4% of foreign pupils in nursery schools were born in Italy ([1], p. 372). At the tertiary level, foreign women show high levels of participation; in the 2023–2024 academic year, they represented 62.8% of newly enrolled foreign students and 62.5% of all foreign university students.

3. Integration Policies

In Italy, migrant integration policies appear fragmented and lack a coherent long-term vision. Although regulatory instruments governing entry and residence exist, integration is often treated as a secondary consequence of legal status rather than as an autonomous

objective of public policy. The absence of a structured national strategy has progressively shifted responsibility to local authorities and the third sector, with municipalities, associations, and non-governmental organizations filling gaps left by the State (according to Article 42 of the Italian Consolidated Act on Immigration, the State, Regions, and Local Authorities, in collaboration with associations and authorities from countries of origin, are required to ensure favorable conditions for the integration of foreign citizens legally present in Italy) [2]. While this decentralized model has enabled bottom-up experimentation with inclusive practices (e.g., the *From the Sea to the City* Consortium, established in 2020) [3], it has also generated marked territorial disparities and uneven access to integration services (see [4], for a picture of the situation in Italy at the time of the first EU migratory crisis (2015) and the recent Oxfam report [5]).

Moreover, recent legislation has increasingly prioritized emergency-driven and security-oriented approaches to migration management. This trend is exemplified by Decree No. 20 of 2023 (so-called *Cutro Decree*) [6], which has further restricted opportunities for social inclusion. In this context, integration is formally envisaged but substantially weak, failing to ensure migrants' effective participation in the social, economic, and civil life of the Country.

4. The Language Issue as a Critical Point

Language constitutes a central dimension of migrant integration—not only as a means of communication, but also as a prerequisite for social, economic, and legal participation. However, the growing imposition of language requirements for access to fundamental rights has not been matched by adequate and accessible language-learning opportunities. At the European level, integration has increasingly been framed from an inclusive process into a selective criterion, with language tests functioning as tool of migration control. Despite the numerous policies and frameworks implemented by the European Union to foster integration and inclusiveness for migrant women—such as the Equal Treatment Directive, the 2020–2025 EU Gender Equality Strategy, the 2021–2027 EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) as a specific instrument to improve access to employment and education for vulnerable groups, including migrant women—the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been widely adopted by EU Member States to establish standardized levels of language proficiency. Migrants are often required to attain a specific CEFR level (e.g., A1 or B1) in order to qualify for residency permits or citizenship. Furthermore, many EU countries have incorporated language requirements into their integration policies, linking language proficiency to residency status, citizenship acquisition or access to social benefits.

In Italy, language-training provision is fragmented, territorially uneven, and poorly coordinated at the national level. Programmes often fail to accommodate migrant's literacy levels and practical needs, making it difficult to attain required competences within prescribed timeframes and increasing the risk of exclusion and legal vulnerability.

Women holding family-based or long-term residence permits face particular disadvantages. Often arriving at an advanced stage of their partner's migration trajectory, they tend to remain confined to the domestic sphere. Cultural norms reinforcing traditional gender roles further exacerbate this condition, fostering processes of self-segregation that hinder language acquisition and social participation and increase the risk of marginalization [7,8].

These challenges underscore the need for a systemic, multi-level migration strategy based on coordinated action between public institutions and the third sector, aimed at ensuring effective linguistic and social inclusion and full access to fundamental rights.

5. The Migrant and Inclusive Communities (MeCI) Project

In response to these challenges, various initiatives worldwide have sought to mitigate migrants' vulnerability through technological tools. Among these, the MeCI project (see Supplementary Materials and [9,10]), launched in 2018 by the University of Molise, in collaboration with the Municipality of Larino (Campobasso) and the Medihospes cooperative—then responsible for managing the local SPRAR (now SAI, the current reception system established by Decree-Law No. 130/2020) centre, represents a particularly noteworthy case (SAI replaces Protection System for International Protection Holders and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors- SIPROIMI, which had been introduced by the first Security Decree Law No. 113/2018).

The project aimed to promote migrant integration through, *inter alia*, the development of a mobile application designed to support orientation, communication, and inclusion. Implemented between 2019 and 2021–2022, MeCI targeted both migrants hosted in the reception centre and local residents, with the goal of fostering interaction and community building.

As part of the research, a series of field interviews explored the project's origins, development, and impact. Findings highlight how the territorial dispersion of migrants in rural areas, combined with close social relations typical of small communities, can facilitate integration and prevent ghettoisation dynamics common in large metropolitan areas. Historical, cultural, and artistic traditions, along with strong social cohesion and youth-oriented activities (e.g., sports and music, often promoted by religious groups), further support inclusive processes. Communities characterised by returning emigrants also exhibit heightened empathy and solidarity.

The MeCI represents a virtuous counter-example to Italy's prevailing, fragmented, and emergency-based integration approach. It demonstrates that integration is more effective when developed locally, grounded in concrete needs, and embedded in dense relational contexts ([11], for an in-depth analysis of the European situation, see [12]). The application's value lies not in technology *per se*, but in its function as a linguistic and social mediator, facilitating access to information, services, and community life [13,14].

Interviews emphasized the tool's capacity to reduce information asymmetries that often hinder migrants' inclusion, thereby enhancing autonomy and participation. However, the project also reveals a structural limitation of the Italian integration system: the lack of mechanisms for institutionalizing and scaling up successful practices. Despite positive outcomes, MeCI remained a time-limited initiative, constrained by temporary funding and local commitment, with no national framework to ensure continuity or replication.

Although not an explicit objective, particular attention was devoted to migrant women. Field experience showed that women face specific barriers related to family responsibilities, childcare, and limited digital literacy. These factors restrict access to training and information despite strong motivation. Gender differences thus concern not willingness or capacity, but unequal starting conditions and opportunities, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive interventions that ensure accessible spaces and times for participation.

This tension highlights a central issue in the integration system: there are effective practices, already tested at the local level and capable of producing concrete results, but they remain confined to isolated interventions and lack a stable structure. The MeCI experience shows that integration can take on a truly inclusive dimension when it is built on local, participatory, and linguistically accessible foundations; at the same time, it highlights the difficulty of public policies in valuing and translating such experiences into lasting and replicable models. From this perspective, the project should not be seen as an exception, but as empirical evidence of the systemic shortcomings that characterize the current governance of integration.

6. Policy Implications of the MeCI Outcomes

The MeCI outcomes concur with recent integration-policy studies [15] to make evident five policy implications for the integration of migrants in the EU. First, the MeCI-Larino app experience highlights the importance of creating tools that facilitate the integration of migrants into local communities. Policies should focus on developing and promoting digital solutions that address migrants' immediate needs, such as language learning, employment opportunities, and cultural adaptation. Understanding the specific needs of residents is also important. Local policymakers should support research-driven approaches to design solutions that cater to diverse user profiles. In general terms, effective integration policies should consider evidence-based factors, such as the demographic and geographic characteristics of regions, the direct interest of municipalities, and the socio-economic context and conditions of migrants. This approach can help tailor policies to local needs and maximize their impact.

Second, the project emphasizes the need for active involvement of local communities in integration processes. Policies should encourage initiatives that foster interaction between migrants and residents to reduce prejudice and promote cultural exchange. In this perspective, integration policies should be linked to the EU's territorial cohesion policy, leveraging the advantages of widespread territorial distribution of migrants and fostering social interaction in local communities.

Third, the project demonstrates the role of mobile technology in bridging gaps between migrants and host societies (digital inclusion). Policymakers should prioritize investments in accessible digital platforms that provide essential information and services to migrants.

Fourth, the challenges faced during the project's implementation, such as technical issues, lack of trust, and limited job opportunities, suggest the need for policies that address structural barriers to integration, including economic development and digital literacy.

Further, local authorities, third-sector organizations and academic institutions play a critical role in managing integration processes and facilities. Direct engagement, networking and collaboration among these entities should be encouraged and supported (whole-of-society approach) (about the whole-of-society approach, see [16]). As national policies are trapped in short-term political considerations and not focused on long-term strategies for migrant integration, especially in areas with specific challenges like depopulation and economic decline, the relative public policy can be usefully transferred to the local level, where the relationship between public authorities and territorial communities is easier and more direct.

7. Status of Women and International Framework

Although formally protected in the main national and international regulatory texts, women continue to face in practice profound inequalities. The effective integration of women, especially for those with a migratory background, is closely linked to the position they occupy in different societal groups or in the societies of the country of origin. Over the years, various regulatory and programmatic measures have been adopted to combat gender discrimination, promoting cultural change in the countries that have signed the main agreements.

Among these, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) [17]. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly with Resolution No. 34/180 of 18 December 1979, following the 1967 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women—that describes discrimination against women as “fundamentally unjust and an offense against human rights” in Article 1, it is the main legally binding international instrument on women's rights. CEDAW addresses the issue of gender discrimination in all areas of social life in a comprehensive

and consistent manner, promoting not only formal equality but also substantive equality (for a more in-depth analysis, see [18]). For the first time, an internationally significant document provides a broad and detailed definition of the concept of discrimination [17], including *de facto* obstacles to the full enjoyment of rights [18]: in its introduction (p. 3), discrimination against women is defined as “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field”.

CEDAW requires signatory states to adopt all appropriate measures to remove not only explicit discrimination, but also indirect and systemic discrimination. Substantive equality therefore requires targeted interventions that consider the structural disadvantages that hinder women, even when formal equality is guaranteed.

In this regard, CEDAW stands out for its ability to influence areas often neglected by domestic law. Particularly innovative is the extension of the state’s obligation to discrimination perpetrated by private actors, organizations, or resulting from cultural, religious, or family practices. The State assumes legal responsibility and is called upon to intervene even in areas usually considered part of the private sphere.

However, the high number of reservations formulated compromises the universality and effectiveness of CEDAW, hindering truly uniform and binding protection of women’s rights at the global level. Although the CEDAW standards are a fundamental reference point for the protection of women’s rights, they do not expressly cover the concept of gender-based violence. However, what has remained unimplemented at the global international law level has been implemented at the regional level. In particular, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention (2011), which entered into force in 2014, is now the main legally binding instrument on this issue for States parties, both in Europe and beyond.

The Istanbul Convention is also important from a conceptual point of view, as it provides a clear and shared definition of both domestic violence and gender-based violence (see on this topic [19]). Some of the CEDAW Committee’s jurisprudential decisions have represented an important advance in the interpretation of States’ obligations to protect women against violence, especially considering the situation of migrant women.

8. Recognition of Refugee Status from a Gender Perspective

The original concept of refugee, as outlined in the Geneva Convention (1951), was based on an implicitly male model and did not consider the forms of persecution specifically suffered by women. It was only after several decades that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—the UN agency competent for protecting and assisting millions of refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons forced to flee war, violence, and persecution (guaranteeing them the right to seek asylum and live in safety)—recognized the need for a gender-sensitive interpretation, acknowledging the widespread discriminatory and violent practices to which women are subjected in many cultural and social contexts.

Prohibitions on education and work, restrictions on personal freedom, genital mutilation, sexual violence, coercive practices, and trafficking are structural causes of escape from their country of origin, that include women among those deserving of international protection. This approach has found progressive recognition in European law, with the Istanbul Convention and the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union. The Court has adopted a broad interpretation of the category of ‘particular social group’, including women as such, and has definitively established a gender-based interpretation of the

concept of refugee, thereby expanding the scope of protection for victims of gender-based violence [20].

With the adoption of the Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women (1991), later incorporated into the Guidelines on Gender-Related Persecution (2002), UNHCR clarified that, although there is no explicit reference to gender in the definition of refugee, it has a decisive impact on the forms and causes of persecution. According to UNHCR, the concept of refugee is already capable of encompassing gender issues without the need for formal modification, if it is interpreted in a gender-sensitive manner. However, as these are soft law instruments, the Guidelines are not binding and are not sufficient to institutionalize the established principles on a permanent basis. Their implementation has not taken place at the universal level through a revision of the Geneva Convention, but rather at the regional level, particularly in the legal systems of the Council of Europe and the European Union.

The Istanbul Convention introduced a specific protection regime for women seeking asylum as victims of gender-based violence, expressly recognizing the relevance of this condition for the purposes of international protection (Article 60). Its provisions supplement, on the one hand, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)—which does not contain explicit provisions on asylum—and, on the other, the Geneva Convention, helping to establish gender as a legally relevant factor in the recognition of refugee *status*.

International protection, however, is only part of the protection needed. Protection from violence suffered or feared in the countries of origin must be accompanied by protection from the risk of repetition of the same practices in the countries of destination. In this context, the issue goes beyond the asylum system and touches on the delicate question of the relevance of cultural factors in assessing behaviors imposed by traditions of origin but prohibited by the laws of the host country.

On this point, the Istanbul Convention is preemptory: it imposes positive obligations on contracting states to promote the elimination of prejudices, customs, and practices based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped gender roles (Art. 12, para. 1). Protection against discrimination rooted in oppressive cultural systems cannot therefore be limited to offering protection from external risks but must also be guaranteed within the countries of destination through effective preventive policies and the dissemination of the principle of gender equality, with regard to which States still appear to be largely non-compliant.

In this perspective, the Italian case is emblematic. Despite acceding to CEDAW in 1985 and ratifying the Istanbul Convention in 2013, as well as introducing some specific measures to protect migrant women in implementation of international obligations, significant critical issues remain in the concrete implementation of the provisions of the conventions. The repeated observations of the CEDAW Committee and GREVIO attest to persistent gaps in policies to prevent and combat gender-based violence, attributable not only to regulatory or operational shortcomings, but also to discriminatory institutional practices.

A case in point is *Talpis v. Italy* [21], in which the Strasbourg Court found that the violence suffered by women can be considered a consequence of discriminatory treatment based on sex, perpetrated by the Italian authorities themselves. The ruling highlights a structural dysfunction in the protection system, revealing the extent of the problem of domestic violence and discrimination suffered by women in Italy as an expression of a broader cultural context still permeated by patriarchal models [22]. It follows that the formal protection enshrined in the Italian Constitution and international instruments does not currently correspond to an effective guarantee of substantive equality. The fight against violence against women is now a complex form of multilevel governance, in which international, regional, and national legal instruments are intertwined (for criticism and limitations of CEDAW, see [23]), but whose effectiveness remains subordinate to the ability

of states to overcome not only regulatory gaps but also the cultural resistance that continues to influence the actions of domestic institutions.

Critically, CEDAW has been the subject of several observations: among other things, it has been highlighted that it ignores the structural causes of female subordination, that it legalizes processes that would require profound political transformation, and it universalizes Western standards and values, neglecting local cultural specificities and collective rights. These criticisms make evident the need for an approach that is more sensitive to cultural diversity and more attentive to the political dimension of change [23]. Despite these observations, the supranational control guaranteed by CEDAW and other international institutions remains essential to combat the perpetuation of inequalities and discrimination, especially in contexts where domestic laws continue to provide for discriminatory legal treatment (on this point, see [24], at EU level, [25]). However, in the Italian case, there is a clear need for more effective public policies capable of addressing all forms of violence against women in a cross-cutting manner. A particularly evident critical issue concerns the predominantly criminal law approach of the Italian regulatory response, which has favored a security-based logic, neglecting a preventive and long-term approach. The emphasis on criminalization often results in a focus on punishment rather than preventive measures. Recent examples illustrating the Italian legislator's tendency—previously noted in the text—to prioritize punitive measures over preventive strategies, which are more conducive to effectively addressing systemic issues and fostering long-term solutions, include the 2023 Migration Decree-Law (the so-called Cutro decree) and the 2019 Law on Gender-based Violence (the so-called Red Code, Law No. 69). The latter, aimed at protecting victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, has been criticized for its strong emphasis on punishment rather than on investment in education, awareness-raising campaigns, and support systems designed to prevent violence. This focus on punishment can limit the effectiveness of policies in addressing systemic issues such as poverty, inequality, and lack of access to education or healthcare.

9. An Assessment

The analysis highlights the limitations of existing migrant integration policies in Italy and clearly shows a structural gap between the regulatory framework and the effective implementation, resulting in significant challenges faced by migrants and especially migrant women in practice. Key issues include fragmented integration policies, territorial inequalities, and the absence of a national structural strategy, which has led to reliance on local practices and grassroots projects.

At the supranational level, instruments such as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the ECHR, CEDAW, and the Istanbul Convention promote advanced principles of substantive equality, protection of rights, and integration. Similarly, Italian law formally recognizes fundamental rights in the areas of work, health, education, and protection against violence. However, these guarantees often remain unimplemented or are applied in a fragmented manner. Policies based on an emergency and security logic—as demonstrated by the Cutro Decree (*supra*, Section 3)—and the absence of a comprehensive national strategy compromise effective access to rights, promoting marginalization, dependence, and social invisibility, especially for migrant women.

The vulnerabilities faced by migrant women include occupational segregation, overqualification, precarious employment, and limited access to language and digital tools. Language has progressively shifted from being a tool for inclusion to a selective criterion for access to rights, services, and opportunities. The lack of structured courses and personalized pathways, and the discontinuity of training provision represent a particularly serious barrier for the most vulnerable individuals, exacerbating existing inequalities. The

analysis also shows the impact of cultural factors and traditional gender roles on their integration, which often confines them to the domestic sphere and increases their risk of exclusion. Successful experience happens only when migrants and refugees are informed and their opinions respected. Language skills are preparatory and necessary in this sense. Local experiences such as the MeCI project show that integration models based on participation, linguistic accessibility, and local networks can work, but they remain isolated and lack institutional continuity.

Overall, the research underscores the systemic shortcomings in Italy's migrant integration policies and the need for a shift from a bureaucratic and security-focused approach to one that prioritizes social inclusion, gender equality, and community-based solutions. Integration cannot be reduced to a set of formal requirements or welfare measures but must be understood as a systemic and multi-level process based on rights, prevention, empowerment, and participation. Only through integrated strategies that simultaneously address the legal, social, cultural, and economic dimensions of integration will it be possible to reduce gender inequalities, promote the autonomy of migrant women, and build a more equitable, pluralistic, and inclusive society.

The MeCI outcomes suggest the value of learning from successful local integration experiences, such as those in Molise, to foster community engagement, cultural preparedness, tailored solutions, digital inclusion, and mutual trust in a small social context. The Project success advocates for a more localized, evidence-based, and cohesive approach to migrant integration, emphasizing the importance of legal and technological tools, community involvement, and long-term planning to address structural challenges of migration in the EU.

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