



For better or for worse. The dissolution of interethnic marriages in Italy

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Abstract

I study the role of endogamy, or marrying within the same cultural-ethnic group, on marital instability. Using Italian administrative data on the universe of marriages and separations, I show that interethnic marriages exhibit a 15 percent higher risk of separation than homogamous marriages of natives. Moreover, interethnic marriages between native women and immigrant men are 6.4 percentage points more at risk than marriages between native men and immigrant women. Gender differences map onto cultural differences. Intermarriages of immigrants with marked cultural divides are significantly more at risk, and different measures of cultural distance are informative about the incidence of separation.

Keywords Interethnic Marriage · Marital Instability · Cultural Distance

JEL classification C41 · J12 · J15 · J16

1 Introduction

Recent migration inflows are profoundly transforming the sociocultural landscape of Western societies, making them more culturally diverse than ever before, with socio-economic and political consequences. To effectively address these transformations, it is essential to understand the dynamics of sociocultural integration among immigrant minorities. Some studies, in particular, have placed special emphasis on interethnic marriages (Algan et al. 2012; Kalmijn, 1994, 1998; Meng & Gregory, 2005)¹, which have been interpreted as a sign of integration of minorities (Gordon, 1964).

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¹ In an attempt to measure cultural integration, a large body of empirical work has focused on children's first names (Abramitzky et al. 2018), home language transmission (Clots-Figueras & Masella, 2013; Fouka, 2020), and self-reported national identity (Manning & Roy, 2010). Moreover, a long tradition in economics literature has explored the patterns of immigrants' convergence, by focusing to a large extent on labor market outcomes.

However, few studies have investigated the implications of cross-nativity marriages on marital stability. In this research, I first evaluate whether endogamy (i.e., marrying within the same cultural-ethnic group) affects separation choices conditional on other characteristics of these marriages. Next, focusing on interethnic marriages, I investigate whether the degree of cultural differences between spouses impacts the risk of separation.

A major challenge in estimating the impact of interethnic marriage on the likelihood of separation is that these marriages may differ from homogamous ones in ways that extend beyond the spouses' cultural identities. This complexity complicates our understanding of how cultural differences influence decisions about dissolution. For example, immigrants who choose to marry natives might trade off factors such as age and education over cultural distance. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive and representative data on the marriage and separation choices of natives and immigrants (Adserà & Ferrer, 2015). However, on the one hand, administrative data are often not rich enough to capture the multidimensional nature of the marriage market, i.e., multiple characteristics such as age, education, and cultural identity jointly determine marriage choices and, as such, affect later dissolution outcomes (Adda, Pinotti and Tura, 2025; Goussé et al. 2023; Rosenfeld, 2002).² On the other hand, survey data are generally limited in sample size and – given that separation rates are low – fall short of being representative of the separation choices of immigrants.

To overcome such limitations, my analysis exploits rich administrative data on the universe of marriages and separations registered in Italy from 1995 to 2012, a period that witnessed a massive upsurge in inflows of immigrants from wildly different cultural backgrounds. Data were made available by ISTAT through its ADELE (*Laboratorio per l'Analisi dei Dati ELEMENTARI*) Laboratory. I match marriage and separation records from administrative sources with exact one-to-one matching for over 99 percent of marriages, resulting in a final sample of about 4.5 million marriages and over 300,000 separations. This dataset offers three key advantages. First, from a methodological standpoint, I estimate the hazard rate of separation for interethnic marriages by matching marriages using a comprehensive set of pre-determined assortative mating controls. This approach improves upon previous studies that faced attrition bias and data limitations, even though unobserved factors (such as religiosity or risk preferences) may still influence both the likelihood of entering an interethnic marriage and the risk of separation. Second, to advance the cultural interpretation of marital instability, I investigate the variation in cultural distance within interethnic marriages to show how the degree of cultural disparity between spouses affects the likelihood of marital dissolution. Finally, my focus on interethnic marriages emphasizes differences across cultural-ethnic groups, moving beyond the racial distinctions (often studied in U.S. based research) which are largely rooted in a long history of socioeconomic marginalization and segregation of racial

² Focusing on interethnic marriages in Italy, Adda et al. (2025) show that individuals are matched by trading off different characteristics of their potential spouses. They provide evidence consistent with immigrants trading off spouses' age and education when crossing cultural boundaries by intermarrying with natives. Similarly, focusing on marriages between foreign women and native men in Italy, Guetto & Azzolini (2014) interpret this evidence in line with the status exchange mechanism (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941).

minorities. The cultural differences I examine likely reflect broader cultural diversity, which may influence marital stability through distinct mechanisms.

I provide evidence of a positive differential in the risk of separation in interethnic marriages as compared to homogamous marriages of natives. After controlling for a large set of relevant predetermined assortative mating characteristics that might correlate with cultural-ethnic sorting – such as age, education, past marital history, and labor market factors – I show that the differential remains large and statistically significant. Other things equal, interethnic marriages show a 15 percent higher risk of separation, in line with (Becker, 1973, 1974; Becker, Landes and Michael, 1977)’s theoretical predictions. Interethnic marriages with first-generation immigrants drive the effect, whereas those with second-generation immigrants appear as stable as homogamous marriages of natives. Evidence points to a smooth process of intergenerational convergence to the local culture; in other words, being born and raised in Italy smooths the attachment of second-generation immigrants to the cultural identity of the parents’ origin country and lessens cultural differences within marriage. Conversely, immigrant marriages show a 31 percent lower risk of separation compared to homogamous marriages of natives. With limited or absent deep social networks, the domestic network becomes a crucial support, thus strengthening family cohesion.

The results reveal significant gender differences depending on whether the husband or wife is foreign-born. The risk of separation is 6.4 percentage points higher in interethnic marriages between native women and immigrant men compared to native men and immigrant women. These gender differences map onto cultural differences, reflecting asymmetries in the cultural distribution of interethnic marriages. Native men are more likely to marry immigrant women from Eastern Europe and Latin America, while native women tend to marry men from North African and Middle Eastern countries.

To support this cultural explanation, I leverage additional information about the countries of origin of immigrant spouses. In interethnic marriages, the risk of separation increases with the cultural distance between spouses. For instance, marriages between natives and immigrants from areas like the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa –regions that exhibit considerable cultural dissimilarity from the native environment – are systematically at a higher risk of separation. Delving further into this relationship, I exploit various measures of cultural distance: along genetics, language, religion, and values (Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2009, 2014, 2016). I document that various cultural distance measures – as proxies for spouses’ cultural diversity – are informative about the incidence of separation. Specifically, a standard deviation increase in the genetic distance of spouses induces a 6.6 percent increase in the risk of separation. The robustness of the estimates to various and diverse cultural distance measures suggests that cultural diversity between spouses is a fundamental factor in explaining separation choices.

I conclude by discussing other potential drivers of marital instability in intermarriages that vary by gender, such as economic and institutional channels. Exploiting additional survey data on female labor market participation, I note that female labor participation and traditional gender roles penalize immigrant women’s economic independence in interethnic marriages, which plausibly affects separation choices. For instance, taking as reference native women in homogamous marriages, immigrant women married to native men are 10 percentage points less likely to work and supply, on average, 3.5 hours less of

market work per week. In contrast, native wives married to immigrant men are not statistically different from wives in homogamous native marriages. Moreover, I illustrate that labor choices are closely tied to gender role norms. Compared to native women married to native husbands, immigrant women married to natives are more likely to adhere to traditional gender role norms. Lastly, I investigate another potential channel related to anticipated differences in judicial outcomes following separation, focusing on alimony obligations, family home arrangements, and child custody assignments. Overall, I present evidence showing no significant differences in post-dissolution agreements when comparing homogamous native marriages and interethnic marriages, regardless of the gender of the foreign spouse.

1.1 Related literature

In the last decades, a growing literature has examined family transformations (Browning et al. 2014), focusing on rising divorce rates, their causes, and consequences. The following section concentrates on the role played by cultural differences on marital instability.

From a theoretical perspective, the theory of marriage proposed by Becker (1973, 1974) predicts positive assortative mating in the marriage market when the characteristics of spouses serve as complementary inputs in the household's production function. Put differently, individuals select spouses with similar cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, races, and religious affiliations if these cultural attributes demonstrate complementarity in household production, motivated by i) language similarity and communication and ii) cultural socialization preferences. Specifically, drawing from the cultural transmission literature, parents value their children's cultural identity and possess a mechanism for cultural socialization. Therefore, cultural incentives lead to the selection of homogamous marriages, as they provide access to more effective vertical socialization technologies (Bisin, Topa and Verdier, 2004; Bisin & Tura, 2019; Bisin & Verdier, 2000).³ Following Becker (1973, 1974), similarity in cultural attributes within marriage enhances the quality of the match in such a way that homogamous marriages exhibit a higher marital utility compared to interethnic marriages, conditional on other spouses' characteristics being the same. This framework rationalizes separation choices as unexpected adverse variations in marital utility. Negative surprises can trigger divorce, particularly in marriages with lower marital utility. Therefore, interethnic marriages face higher separation risks (i.e., the heterogamous hypothesis) and the greater the difference between the spouses' cultural traits, the higher the likelihood of separation.⁴

³ Similarly, the same preferences for children's socialization might induce parents in heterogamous families to dissolve the marital union and employ a single socialization tool whenever the distance between the spouses' cultures weakens the effectiveness of the direct socialization process. In respect of this, Dohmen, Falk, Huffman and Sunde (2012) have shown that single mothers' socialization technologies are equivalent to those of mothers in homogamous families and significantly more effective than heterogamous mothers' technologies.

⁴ The same framework suggests that interethnic marriages, due to lower marital surplus, may have weaker incentives to invest in marriage-specific public goods, such as children. Indeed, Bisin & Tura (2019) finds that culturally homogamous couples systematically exhibit higher fertility, both in the likelihood of having children and in the number of children, regardless of educational background.

To test the heterogamous hypothesis, most of the extant literature examines racial differences in U.S. marriages, starting with White-Black unions (Monahan, 1970). Bratter & King (2008) note higher divorce rates among interracial couples after ten years of marriage. Zhang & Van Hook (2009) analyzed 1990–2001 data, showing interracial marriages had a 15% higher divorce risk, with Black-White unions the least stable, followed by Hispanic-White, while Asian-White marriages were more stable than endogamous White marriages. They attribute this findings to minority integration challenges, with White-Black unions facing social isolation, particularly from the White community (Porterfield, 1982; Yancey & Yancy, 2007). Rosenfeld (2002) and Phillips & Sweeney (2006) investigate how different risk factors might affect divorce, focusing on intermarriages with Mexican women.

Despite extensive research on marital instability, few studies examine cultural-ethnic differences in European countries, where cultural heterogeneity is inherently linked to historical and contemporaneous immigration. As an exception, Kalmijn, de Graaf and Janssen (2005) focus on marriages (1974–1984) in the Netherlands, finding a strong positive correlation between national heterogamy and divorce, while religious heterogamy has a weaker effect. Intermarriages involving Moroccan and Turkish immigrants show the highest divorce rates, supporting the assimilation hypothesis that cultural-ethnic boundaries now matter more than religious ones. Unfortunately, data limitations do not allow the authors to control for other relevant observable matching dimensions, assuming in principle that interethnic marriages do not differ from homogamous native marriages by educational and age make-up (Adserà & Ferrer, 2015; Guetto & Azzolini, 2014). Hence, the results have to be interpreted as a potential upper bound of a genuine relation, assuming a positive correlation between unobserved matching dimensions and cultural-ethnic ones.

In Italy, Lee & Manasse (2013) analyze the probability of dissolution in intermarriages using marriage data from 2008 to 2010, finding that the separation risk for intermarriages falls between that of immigrants and homogamous natives, with the latter being the most stable. In a subsequent study, Bottazzi et al. (2017) focus solely on separation transitions during the same period. My analysis exploits the dynamic structure of the matched marriage-separation data to address selection bias from event censoring. Additionally, I explore the cultural and economic factors influencing marital instability, highlighting the impact of cultural differences between spouses. In the same Italian context, Adda et al. (2025) study how institutional changes affect marital stability. By leveraging the successive enlargements of the European Union as an exogenous source of variation for legal status motives, they show that the hazard rate of separation for mixed couples (between natives and immigrants from new EU countries) formed before the EU enlargements increased by 20 percent, driven by changes in marital surplus following the policy shift. In contrast, marriages formed after the enlargements (i.e., in the absence of legal status motives) are remarkably stable, consistent with improved selection into marriage.⁵

⁵ Additionally, Schulz & Siuda (2023) demonstrate that a reform tightening unemployment insurance in Germany led to fewer intermarriages and improved stability, particularly among individuals facing unemployment risks. Along the same lines, Grossbard-Shechtman & Vernon (2020) show that legal status and assimilation benefits shape both intermarriage and intrahousehold behavior in the US: immigrant women in mixed marriages often take on a greater workload (an assimilation price) in exchange for legal and social advantages.

2 Data and empirical strategy

I examine interethnic marriages in Italy, where immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon; the number of foreign (legal) residents has steadily increased over the past decades, from half a million in 1990 to more than 5 million in 2018, with different waves of heterogeneous immigration, both in time and ethnic composition. This section details data sources, sample construction, descriptive analysis, and the estimation strategy.

2.1 Data

I take advantage of rich administrative data on the universe of marriages celebrated in Italy from 1995 to 2012. Marriage registries provide detailed information on pertinent sociodemographic characteristics of the spouses at marriage (including whether they were born in Italy, their country of origin, and citizenship) and marriage information. These data are made available by the Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT) through its Laboratory for Elementary Data Analysis (ADELE).⁶

I complement these data with administrative court data on the universe of separations registered in Italy throughout the same period.⁷ Separation is the formal act that begins divorce proceedings. With Law 74/1987 and until 2015, a minimum period of three years of legal separation was required to obtain a divorce in due course. For this reason, separations provide a more accurate representation of the timing of marital instability. Courts' registries contain details such as (i) the main sociodemographic characteristics of the spouses, (ii) retrospective information on marriage and family characteristics, and (iii) information on the separation proceedings and the post-dissolution arrangements.⁸

I match marriage and separation records through time-invariant observable characteristics of spouses available in both registries, with an exact one-to-one matching for 99.5 percent of marriages. I restrict the sample to marriages with at least one spouse residing in Italy at marriage, to account for potential out-migration choices. The final sample records about 4.5 million marriages celebrated in Italy from 1995 to 2012 (see Panel a. of Table 1), and includes over 300,000 corresponding separations (see Panel b. of Table 1).⁹

⁶ Requests to access the data for research purposes should be addressed to ISTAT through an open application procedure. Authorized researchers can access and use the data from workstations in secure rooms within the ISTAT offices. The analysis output is made available upon inspection by ADELE officers in compliance with the laws on the protection of statistical confidentiality and personal data. For further information, visit <https://www.istat.it/it/informazioni-e-servizi/per-i-ricercatori/laboratorio-adele>.

⁷ For the period under investigation, 1995–2012, court registries constitute a unique source for data on separations. However, since 2014 (Law 162/2014) consensual separations and divorces can be submitted directly to the civic registrar. This excludes potential issues in the selection of available data.

⁸ Proceedings classified to end with conciliation, cancellation, or change of rite are registered, but no information is available for them. I drop them from the final sample because they are not representative of effective marital dissolution choices, accounting for 1.6 percent of the total number of separations.

⁹ Marriage data account only for legal marriages. While the number of cohabiting couples has increased only recently, the share of cohabiting native couples is still only about 9% compared to the EU average of 14.5% in 2011, and the number of cohabitations between natives and foreigners is minimal compared to legal marriages (Adda et al. 2025).

I identify native and immigrant spouses based on their origin, i.e., an individual is defined as an immigrant if born in a country different from Italy. I further distinguish first and second-generation immigrants by exploiting information on citizenship acquisition.¹⁰ Marriages are classified into three categories: *homogamous* marriages where both spouses are Italian natives; *interethnic* marriages between one native Italian spouse and an immigrant one, and *immigrant* marriages where both spouses are immigrants.¹¹ To strengthen the comparison with previous research, and for robustness, I also exploit citizenship information to identify native and immigrant spouses. Following the citizenship classification, I identify an individual as an immigrant if she does not have Italian citizenship. Because of systematic differences in selection into naturalization across immigrants and origins (Govind, 2021), the citizenship definition might overestimate the role of cultural-ethnic assortative mating on marital instability (Frimmel, Halla and Winter-Ebmer, 2013; Kalmijn et al. 2005).

2.2 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics separately for marriages and separations. In the sample, 86.8 percent of marriages are homogamous, while interethnic and immigrant marriages account for 11.2 and 2 percent, respectively. In interethnic marriages, immigrant spouses come from diverse geographic backgrounds, and the origin representation is asymmetric along gender lines. Figure 1 shows the percentage of interethnic marriages by macro area of origin of the immigrant spouse, separately by gender of the foreign spouse. For both native men and women, the vast majority of interethnic marriages are with immigrants from European countries. However, while native men are more likely to marry immigrant women from East Europe and Latin America (with the most represented origins being Romania, Ukraine, and Brazil), native women are disproportionately more likely to marry immigrant men from North-African and Middle-East countries (with the most represented origins being Morocco and Tunisia in Africa and Albania in Europe); see also Appendix Fig. A1.

Concerning separations, approximately 7 percent of all marriages ended in separation between 1995 and 2012; see Panel b. of Table 1. Of these marriages, the percentage of dissolution is 6.8 percent in homogamous marriages of natives and 7.8 percent in interethnic ones. Figure 2 reports the Kaplan-Meier estimates of the survival probability, that is, the proportion of marriages that were not dissolved (on the vertical axis), after a stated number of years (on the horizontal axis).¹² Estimates reveal differences in marital stability, with a notable gap emerging two years after marriage and widening over time.¹³

¹⁰ Specifically, data provide information on Italian citizenship. Individuals might i) have Italian citizenship at birth, ii) acquire Italian citizenship by naturalization, or iii) not have Italian citizenship. I define second-generation immigrants as individuals born in Italy without Italian citizenship at birth.

¹¹ Among immigrant marriages, 82 percent are marriages of immigrants from the same country of origin, representing a relatively homogeneous group. In contrast, only a tiny fraction of spouses come from different countries.

¹² The Kaplan-Meier estimator of the survival function corresponds to the conditional probability of surviving past time t , given survival up to that time. It is estimated as the ratio of the number of individuals that experienced the event during the specific period, over the number of subjects at risk up to that period (i.e., all failures and censored observations at or after that time) (Kaplan & Meier, 1958).

¹³ Confidence intervals are evaluated from a Greenwood estimate of the variance of the survival function (Greenwood et al. 1926).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Panel a. Marriages				Panel b. Separations			
	All (1)	Homogamous (2)	Interethnic (3)	Immigrants (4)	All (5)	Homogamous (6)	Interethnic (7)	Immigrants (8)
Sample Share (%)	100	86.8	11.2	2.0	100	85.9	12.8	1.3
Age Assortative Mating								
Wife 16–20 age	0.038	0.039	0.036	0.059	0.065	0.065	0.068	0.074
Wife 21–25 age	0.226	0.227	0.208	0.273	0.309	0.311	0.297	0.299
Wife 26–30 age	0.376	0.386	0.307	0.308	0.379	0.390	0.312	0.292
Wife 31–35 age	0.207	0.207	0.208	0.191	0.158	0.156	0.168	0.164
Wife 36–40 age	0.079	0.075	0.108	0.093	0.052	0.048	0.079	0.096
Wife more 40 age	0.074	0.066	0.133	0.076	0.037	0.030	0.076	0.073
Same age or age difference 0–3 y	0.419	0.439	0.339	0.288	0.401	0.425	0.250	0.282
Age difference 4–6 y	0.223	0.229	0.184	0.194	0.222	0.231	0.173	0.172
Age difference more 7 y	0.190	0.169	0.341	0.231	0.202	0.178	0.361	0.278
Age difference 1–3 y	0.115	0.116	0.103	0.129	0.116	0.117	0.103	0.121
Age difference more 4 y	0.053	0.047	0.084	0.107	0.059	0.049	0.113	0.146
Education Assort Mating								
Husb Low - Wife Low	0.308	0.303	0.326	0.407	0.330	0.325	0.365	0.460
Husb Low - Wife Medium	0.152	0.151	0.164	0.083	0.167	0.165	0.183	0.044
Husb Low - Wife High	0.019	0.017	0.037	0.027	0.014	0.012	0.031	0.014
Husb Medium - Wife Low	0.064	0.062	0.076	0.012	0.073	0.071	0.088	0.006
Husb Medium - Wife Medium	0.282	0.290	0.230	0.311	0.281	0.291	0.214	0.301
Husb Medium - Wife High	0.049	0.049	0.049	0.053	0.038	0.038	0.035	0.061
Husb High - Wife Low	0.008	0.008	0.013	0.010	0.007	0.006	0.014	0.023

Table 1 continued

	Panel a. Marriages			Panel b. Separations				
	All (1)	Homogamous (2)	Interethnic (3)	Immigrants (4)	All (5)	Homogamous (6)	Interethnic (7)	Immigrants (8)
Husb High - Wife Medium	0.046	0.046	0.044	0.034	0.042	0.042	0.038	0.034
Husb High - Wife High	0.072	0.074	0.061	0.063	0.048	0.050	0.032	0.058
<i>Marital History Assortative</i>								
Husb First - Wife First	0.888	0.907	0.760	0.825	0.891	0.912	0.763	0.818
Husb First - Wife Second	0.035	0.027	0.084	0.064	0.039	0.030	0.097	0.070
Husb Second - Wife First	0.047	0.041	0.092	0.073	0.046	0.038	0.092	0.078
Husb Second - Wife Second	0.030	0.025	0.064	0.038	0.024	0.020	0.048	0.032
Disjoint	0.551	0.552	0.582	0.335	0.575	0.566	0.648	0.453
Husb professional attainment	1.673	1.689	1.612	1.316	1.733	1.755	1.621	1.417
Wife professional attainment	1.390	1.389	1.410	1.097	1.396	1.401	1.378	0.979
Observations	4,464,429	3,872,958	501,663	89,808	306,647	263,563	39,133	3,951

This Table depicts the descriptive statistics for assortative mating dimensions by family type and marital status. Panel a. reports estimates for all marriages, while panel b. is for separated marriages only. Columns (1) and (5) report estimates for all marriages and separations; columns (2) and (6) for homogamous marriages between Italian native spouses; columns (3) and (7) for interethnic marriages between one Italian spouse and an immigrant spouse; columns (4) and (8) for marriages of immigrants. Age assortative mating includes six dummies for the wife's ages (16–20, 21–25, 26–30, 31–35, 36–40, more than 40) and five dummies for spousal age difference. Education assortative mating includes nine dummies for combinations of spouses' educational levels (low for compulsory education, medium for high school degree, and high for graduate and post-graduate education). Marital history assortative mating includes four dummies for combinations of spouses in first and second or further marriages. Disjoint is a dummy for prenuptial financial agreement (disjoint vs. joint management of family wealth). Labor market controls include the professional attainment of both spouses

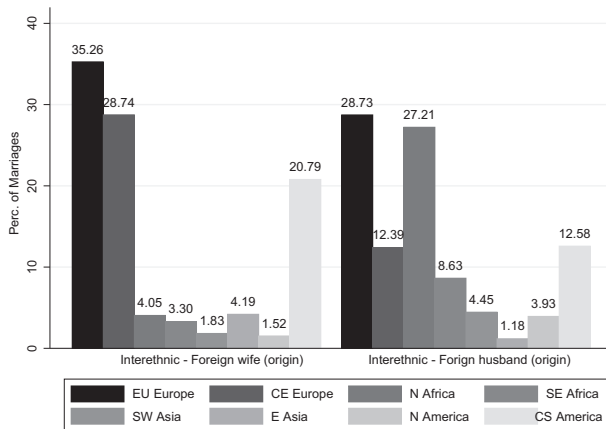


Fig. 1 Distribution of interethnic marriages by origin and gender. This Figure reports the distribution of interethnic marriages by macro-area of origin and gender of the immigrant spouse

Interethnic marriages consistently show lower survival probabilities than homogamous native marriages, while immigrant marriages are more stable. After 10 years, 91.7% of homogamous, 89.5% of interethnic, and 92.6% of immigrant marriages remain intact. At 15 years, these figures drop to 88.7%, 86.6%, and 90.4%, respectively; see Panel a. of Fig. 2. Results point to an increase in the unconditional probability of marital dissolution in the absence of positive assortative mating along the cultural-ethnic dimension. Moreover, Panel b. of Fig. 2 highlights greater stability in interethnic marriages where the immigrant spouse is a woman.

In terms of the wife's age at the time of the marriage, the vast majority of unions occurred when the wife was 26-30 years old and these also corresponded to more unstable marriages; see Table 1. Generally, later marriage leads to higher stability, a pattern seen in both homogamous and interethnic marriages. However, women in interethnic marriages were typically older, with 10% aged 36-40 and 13% over 40 at marriage. In terms of the difference in ages between the spouses, in the vast majority of the unions, around 43.9 percent, marriages took place between spouses of similar age (i.e., an age distance of 0-3 years), while in 17 percent of the unions, the wife was older than the husband. In the case of interethnic unions, only 28 percent had a spousal age difference of 0-3 years, while age differences of more than 7 years were more common, at 34 percent. Hence, for the comparable age of the wife at the time of marriage, the assortativeness in terms of age is quite dissimilar for homogamous vis-à-vis interethnic marriages. This translates into an increase in marital instability. Panel a. of Appendix Fig. A2 shows the distribution of marriages according to age sorting, separately for homogamous and interethnic marriages. It is obvious that interethnic marriages have a lower degree of age assortativeness compared to the other family types. Moreover, Table 1 provides evidence of strong assortative mating along educational lines, with some notable differences between homogamous and interethnic marriages especially among spouses with high and medium education; Panel b. of Appendix Fig. A2 displays the patterns by educational lines. Finally, where marital history is concerned, mixed marriages are more likely to be second or further marriages.

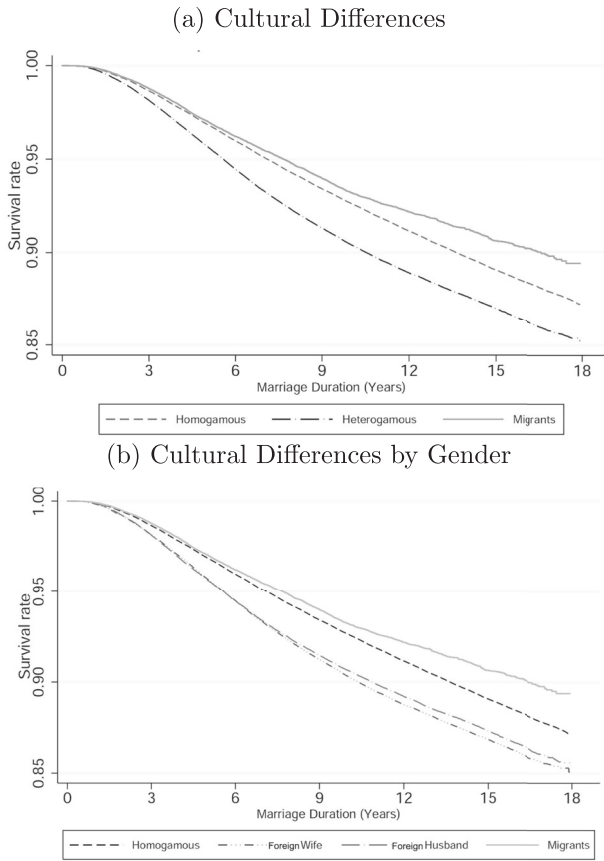


Fig. 2 Kaplan-Meier survival estimates by family. (a) Cultural Differences. (b) Cultural Differences by Gender. This Figure reports Kaplan-Meier estimates of the survival probability to separation. Panel a. reports Kaplan-Meier estimates by families: homogamous refers to marriages among Italian native spouses; interethnic refers to marriages between an Italian native spouse and an immigrant spouse; immigrant refers to marriages among immigrant spouses. Panel b. reports estimates by families, conditioning for the gender of the immigrant spouse in interethnic marriages

Evidence shows that sorting into the marriage market is multidimensional and individuals match taking into account multiple attributes of their potential spouses, which plausibly interact with one another. Overall evidence is consistent with immigrants trading off spouse’s age and education when marrying with natives, in line with Adda et al. (2025). This implies that unconditional estimates of the role of cultural-ethnic sorting on marital instability might confound the effects of marital sorting on other observable dimensions (Adserà & Ferrer, 2015; Guetto & Azzolini, 2014).

2.3 Estimation strategy

The matched data on marriages and separations allows me to follow each married couple over time until potential separation. I investigate the role of cultural-ethnic sorting on marital dissolution, exploiting variability in the duration of marriages. The

analysis is based on completed durations of marriages that were dissolved between 1995 and 2012, while censored durations are derived for the rest of the unions.

I model the transition probability, i.e., the probability that a marriage that has survived up to time t will end at time $t + 1$, as a function of the marriage's duration t , and of a set of covariates $\mathbf{x}' = (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$, following the semiparametric approach devised by Cox (1972). The Cox proportional hazard regression model describes the hazard rate of separation $\theta(t|\mathbf{x})$ after the marriage's duration t , conditional on covariates \mathbf{x} , as factored into two separate functions as follows:

$$\theta(t|\mathbf{x}) = \theta(t) \exp(\mathbf{x}\beta) \quad (1)$$

with $\theta(t)$ representing a baseline hazard common to all couples, augmented by the effect of covariates, which enter the model through the linear predictor $\exp(\mathbf{x}\beta)$. While leaving the baseline hazard $\theta(t)$ totally unrestricted, I estimate the vector of covariates' coefficients β by partial maximum likelihood. This approach remains very tractable while allowing for significant flexibility in the baseline hazard $\theta(t)$.

Estimation is based on the exact matching of marriages with respect to relevant assortative mating dimensions: ethnicity, age of spouses, past marital history, and educational attainment. The main specification adds a dummy for prenuptial financial agreements (disjoint vs. joint management of family wealth) to account for potential anticipated differences in household management and labor market choices (Bayot & Voena, 2015). Labor market controls are also included. All these controls are measured at the moment of marriage. The population size of the husband's and the wife's community is also included as a proxy for the interactions in the local marriage market of reference at the province level, i.e., the province of residence of the spouses. Finally, I include region and year fixed effects to account for heterogeneity across regions and over time. Standard errors are clustered by province.

3 Results

Table 2 reports the coefficient estimates and hazard rates of the differential in the likelihood of separation in interethnic and immigrant marriages compared to baseline homogamous marriages of natives. Column (1) of Panel a. reports the estimated unconditional differences in the likelihood of separation, including year and region fixed effects. The results emphasize that cultural-ethnic differences between spouses lead to a higher risk of separation. In particular, compared to homogamous marriages of natives, interethnic marriages (with a foreign husband or wife) show a 21.1 percent higher risk of separation. Conversely, immigrant marriages show a lower probability of separation of 24.3 percent.

Estimates in columns (2-7) control for additional observable assortative mating dimensions. The risk of separation decreases slightly, suggesting a positive correlation among sorting dimensions.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the gap driven by

¹⁴ To the extent that individuals prefer, on average, to match with younger and more educated spouses, I observe that natives who enter into interethnic marriages marry younger and more educated spouses as in (Furtado, 2012). Interethnic marriages thus exhibit larger differences in age and education (lower sorting), potentially making them more likely to separate.

cultural-ethnic differences remains large and statistically significant for both interethnic and immigrant families at around 15.8 and 33.6 percent, respectively, with opposite signs. Column (3) includes the full set of controls, adding in labor market controls and husband's and wife's community population size.^{15,16} Columns (4-6) report sub-period estimates, suggesting a non-monotonic pattern of marital instability over time. It increases in 2001-2006 and slightly decreases afterward, for all marriages.

I investigate the role of cultural transmission by separately analyzing the behavior of first and second or further-generation immigrants. I show that the effect of interest is guided by first-generation immigrants marrying natives. Appendix Table A2 reports estimates and hazard rates of the differential in the likelihood of separation among interethnic marriages of natives with first and second-generation immigrants. While interethnic marriages with first-generation immigrants show a 15.2 percent higher risk of separation, interethnic marriages with second-generation immigrants appear as stable as homogamous marriages.¹⁷

In summary, three considerations arise. First, differences among spouses in the inputs that are complements in the household production (such as cultural-ethnic traits) reduce the gains of interethnic marriages and increase the risk of separation, which is in line with the heterogamous hypothesis (Becker, 1973; Becker et al. 1977). Point estimates are consistent in magnitude with previous evidence from different countries suggesting that the phenomenon is not country-specific and extends beyond racial barriers (Frimmel et al. 2013; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). Second, the higher stability of immigrant marriages underlines the importance of family for minorities. A strong family bond might result from difficulties in economic and sociocultural integration in the host country. Therefore, in the absence of deep social networks, the domestic network becomes a crucial support, thus strengthening family cohesion. Third, the heterogeneous effects across immigrant generations may indicate that being born and raised in Italy is associated with a

¹⁵ Labor market choices are, of course, equilibrium outcomes of the intrahousehold optimization problem of production and consumption, and hence endogenous. Including labor market choices at marriage mitigates a potential endogeneity bias, even if individuals might form labor decisions by anticipating their future marriage allocation (Mazzocco, Ruiz and Yamaguchi, 2014). Nevertheless, labor market controls allow me to proxy for the income and wealth status of the family, as a relevant control for marital stability. I report estimates including labor market controls separately.

¹⁶ Parallel conclusions might be extended to all other sorting characteristics; see Appendix Table A1. In particular, marital instability monotonically decreases with spouses' age. This maturity effect suggests that the process of information acquisition evolves not only with age, in terms of both spouses' own marital preferences (self-acknowledgment effect), but also because of marriage selection mechanisms (learning effect) (Lehrer, 2008). Concerning educational attainment, higher education has a positive effect on marital stability. Simultaneously, the higher the educational gap between the spouses, the higher the risk of marital dissolution (similarly to Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Bruze, Svarer and Weiss, 2015; Siow, 2015).

¹⁷ In line with the current literature (Frimmel et al. 2013; Kalmijn et al. 2005), I also identify native and immigrant spouses according to citizenship information. As expected, column (7) of Table 2 shows that the citizenship classification overestimates the role of endogamy; interethnic marriages exhibit a 28.4 percent higher risk of separation than marriages among natives. Indeed, immigrants who acquire Italian citizenship through naturalization are positively selected along two dimensions. First, immigrants who apply for Italian citizenship are more likely to be integrated into the host culture. Second, among the pool of applicants, immigrants who acquire Italian nationality are closer to natives' cultural values and traditions among the applicants (Govind, 2021).

Table 2 Risk of separation: Cultural-ethnic differences

Share (%)	Baseline Estimates		Sub-period Estimates				Citizenship	
	(1995–2012)		(1995–2000)	(2001–2006)	(2007–2012)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)		(7)
Panel a. Ethnic Assortative Mating								
Homogamous (reference group)								
Interethnic	11.24	0.191*** [1.211]	0.146*** [1.157]	0.136*** [1.146]	0.091*** [1.096]	0.182*** [1.199]	0.163*** [1.177]	0.250*** [1.284]
Immigrant	2.01	-0.278*** [0.757]	-0.409*** [0.664]	-0.375*** [0.687]	-0.409*** [0.665]	-0.342*** [0.710]	-0.411*** [0.663]	-0.530*** [0.589]
Panel b. Ethnic Assortative Mating: Gender Asymmetries								
Homogamous (reference group)								
Interethnic - Foreign Wife	7.79	0.181*** [1.199]	0.134*** [1.144]	0.117*** [1.125]	0.107*** [1.113]	0.149*** [1.160]	0.013 [1.013]	0.196*** [1.216]
Interethnic - Foreign Husband	3.45	0.212*** [1.236]	0.169*** [1.184]	0.173*** [1.189]	0.063*** [1.065]	0.263*** [1.301]	0.434*** [1.543]	0.414*** [1.513]
Observations	4,464,429	4,464,429	4,464,429	4,464,429	1,674,292	1,479,605	1,310,532	4,464,429
Assortative Mating controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Labor market controls	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Husband's community population	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wife's community population	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2 continued

Share (%)	Baseline Estimates (1995–2012)		Sub-period Estimates (1995–2000)		Sub-period Estimates (2001–2006)		Sub-period Estimates (2007–2012)		Citizenship
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)		
Region and Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

This Table reports Cox regression coefficient estimates and hazard rates (in squared brackets) of the risk of separation by family type. Family type shares refer to the overall sample. The omitted group comprises homogamous native marriages. In Panel a., the dummy variable Interethnic refers to marriages between a native and an immigrant spouse. In Panel b., interethnic marriages are split according to the gender of the immigrant spouse: marriages between a native husband and a foreign wife (Interethnic - Foreign wife), and marriages between a native wife and a foreign husband (Interethnic - Foreign husband). Immigrants refer to marriages between two immigrant spouses. Assortative mating controls account for assortative mating dimensions in terms of age, education, and past marital history of spouses, as reported in Table 1. Labor market controls include dummies for the professional attainment of spouses (blue-collar, white-collar, director, self-employed, and entrepreneur). A dummy for prenuptial financial agreement (disjoint vs. joint management of family wealth) is also included. Husband's and wife's community population control for the population size of the spouses' province of residence as a proxy of the local marriage market of reference. Columns (4–6) report sub-period estimates for marriages that took place from 1995 to 2000, from 2001 to 2006, and from 2007 to 2012. Column (7) exploits the citizenship definition of immigrants. Region and year of marriage fixed effects are included in all specifications. Standard errors clustered by province (99 provinces) are reported in parentheses. Significance level: **** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

weaker attachment of second-generation immigrants to the cultural identity of their parents' country of origin, which could in turn lessen cultural differences within marriage (Bisin et al. 2004; Bisin & Verdier, 2000). This pattern suggests a possible convergence of second-generation immigrants toward the host country's socio-cultural values, though more evidence is needed. Analyzed together, the results point to the importance of cultural differences between spouses in explaining marital instability as a result of deep-seated differences in cultural values, routines, and traditions.

I further explore heterogeneity by gender lines. Figure 1 presented in Section 2.2 shows significant differences by gender in the cultural background of immigrant spouses, with native men being more likely to marry immigrant women from East Europe and Latin America, and native women disproportionately more likely to marry immigrant men from North-African and Middle-Eastern countries. To the extent that gender asymmetries in the marital distribution across origins reflect significant cultural differences of immigrant minorities with respect to the native culture, I expect to observe gender imbalances in marital instability within marriages between a native woman and an immigrant man more at risk of separation. Panel b. of Table 2 reports estimates by analyzing interethnic marriages by gender of the immigrant spouse.¹⁸ Partialling out the effects of covariates, the probability of separation is 12.5 percent higher in interethnic marriages between a native man and an immigrant woman compared to homogenous marriages. The increase in separation probability for interethnic marriages between a native woman and an immigrant man is 18.9 percent. As expected, this comparison reveals a significant 6.4 percentage point foreign-spouse gender gap. Gender differences in marital instability among intermarriages are consistent with stronger cultural asymmetries of marriages involving native women and immigrant men compared to cultural differences between immigrant women marrying native men.

In the following Section, I support this cultural explanation by leveraging the information about the exact country of origin of immigrant spouses and building on various cultural distance measures. I then discuss other plausible drivers contributing to explaining the observed gender differences among intermarriages, such as economic and institutional channels.

4 Mechanisms

4.1 Cultural channel

I exploit variability in the country of origin of immigrant spouses using two approaches. First, I divide interethnic marriages according to the macro area of origin of the immigrant spouse. Second, I proxy for the distance between native and immigrant spouses with various measures of cultural distance.

¹⁸ I report only estimates for interethnic marriages between a native man and an immigrant woman and for interethnic marriages between a native woman and an immigrant husband. Marriages of immigrants are included in the estimation and point estimates of course are the same as the one reported in panel A.

4.1.1 Macro-areas of origin

I divide interethnic marriages according to the macro area of origin of the immigrant spouse into European-EU15 countries, Other European, African, Asian, Latin American, and other OECD countries.¹⁹ Column (1) of Table A3 shows that the average effect in Table 2 masks significant heterogeneity by immigrants' cultural origin. In column (2), I include controls for observable matching dimensions (age, education, and past marital history), labor market controls, and education interacted by age and profession fixed effects to account for differences in spouses' labor market trajectories. Compared to homogamous marriages of natives, interethnic marriages appear more stable if the immigrant spouse comes from Europe and other OECD countries. On the contrary, positive differences arise in all other cases. In particular, interethnic marriages between natives and immigrants from Other European countries have a 4 percent higher risk of separation than do homogamous marriages of natives. The corresponding gap in the risk of separation increases to 18 percent for marriages with immigrant spouses from Latin America, and to 55 percent when immigrants originate from Africa, which frequently happens in intermarriages involving native women and immigrant men. The gap in the risk of separation increases to 20 percent with immigrant spouses from Asian countries. As before, I study separately intermarriages between a native husband and a foreign wife (column 3) and intermarriages of foreign husbands married to native wives (column 4). Intermarriages between a native wife and a foreign husband are more unstable than intermarriages involving foreign men, especially for foreign men from African and Asian countries.

To the extent that differences by origin proxy for cultural differences, evidence suggests a close connection between the distance in the cultural background of spouses and the risk of marital dissolution; in other words, the greater the distance between the spouses' respective cultural-ethnic identities, the higher the risk of separation.

4.1.2 Cultural distance proxies

To further investigate whether the within-family cultural diversity significantly predicts marital instability, I focus only on interethnic marriages, i.e., marriages between one native Italian spouse and an immigrant one, disregarding homogamous marriages of natives and marriages of immigrants. I proxy for the distance in cultural traits between native and immigrant spouses exploiting various measures of cultural distance along genetics, language, religion, and values (Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2009, 2016). Linguistic distance is based on the language tree classification, which separates languages into groups based on perceived similarities: the lower the number of common nodes between two languages, the higher the distance between them. Similarly, religious distance originates from a tree-based representation of religions. Values measure distance in cultural norms, values, and attitudes based on

¹⁹ Following Adda et al. (2025), the classification of countries by macro-area reflects both the prevalence of each cultural-ethnic group in Italy and the relative cultural distance of countries to Italy. The list of countries belonging to each macro area is reported in Appendix Table A4.

the World Values Survey (WVS) answers. Finally, genetic distance provides an indication of the degree of genealogical relatedness between two populations based on the heterozygosity index, i.e., the probability that two alleles from a given locus, selected at random in two populations, will be different (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994; Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2009). The greater the genetic distance between two populations, the longer they have been apart, and the greater the difference in cultural values.²⁰ On average, European, other European, and other OECD countries show the lowest genetic distance to Italy. In contrast, African and Sub-Saharan African countries exhibit the highest genetic distance from Italian culture, approximately five to six times greater than that of European countries. In standardized terms, one sd in genetic distance is comparable to the difference between Italy and countries such as Chad or Cameroon. Countries like Senegal, Namibia, Uganda, Malawi, and Zambia (in order) exhibit cultural distances from Italy that exceed one sd.

Table 3 reports the estimated effect of cultural distance within interethnic marriages on the hazard rate of separations. I exploit cultural distance along genetics, language, religion, and values, in panels a, b, c, and d, respectively. All cultural distance measures are standardized. The results indicate that the degree of cultural differences between spouses explains marital dissolution choices, that is, *ceteris paribus*, the greater the distance in the spouses' cultural-ethnic origins, the greater the risk of separation. Other things equal, column (1) of Table 3 shows that an increase of one standard deviation in the genetic distance leads to an increase of about 6.6 percent in the risk of separation. In comparison, the increase of one standard deviation in the linguistic distance leads to an increase of about 3 percent in the risk of separation, and the increase is as high as 9 and 20 percent considering religious and value distance. The robustness of the estimates to various and diverse cultural distance measures suggests that cultural diversity between spouses is a fundamental factor in explaining separation choices.

Results are confirmed when accounting for systematic differences in earnings potential, by including education interacted by age fixed effects for both spouses, as in column (2) of Table 3. To further control for differences in labor market trajectories by education and professional attainment, in column (3) I include education interacted by age and profession fixed effects for both spouses. Results are robust and quantitatively similar in magnitude. Finally, column (4) adds macro area of origin fixed effects for the foreign spouse, controlling for geographical, historical, economic, and institutional differences. By including macro area fixed effects, estimates exploit the variation in the cultural diversity of foreign countries with respect to Italy within the same macro area. Other things equal, results in column (4) are qualitatively similar and significant (with the only exception of linguistic distance) suggesting that the variation in cultural diversity between spouses is crucial in explaining dissolution choices.

In line with the gender asymmetry presented above, I further investigate the presence of systematic differences in the contribution of cultural distance on the risk of separation by gender of the foreign spouse. In Fig. A3, I further distinguish between a native husband and a foreign wife and intermarriages of foreign husbands married to native wives. *Ceteris paribus*, intermarriages between native men and

²⁰ See Spolaore & Wacziarg (2016) for a more detailed description of these four cultural distance measures. They document a positive correlation among the different measures of cultural distance.

Table 3 Risk of separation: Cultural distance measures

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
a. Genetic Distance	0.064*** [1.066] (0.007)	0.070*** [1.073] (0.008)	0.063*** [1.065] (0.007)	0.048*** [1.049] (0.010)
b. Linguistic distance	0.028*** [1.028] (0.008)	0.039*** [1.040] (0.008)	0.033*** [1.034] (0.008)	0.008 [1.008] (0.016)
c. Religious distance	0.086*** [1.090] (0.008)	0.095*** [1.100] (0.009)	0.089*** [1.093] (0.008)	0.138*** [1.148] (0.013)
d. WVS distance	0.178*** [1.195] (0.008)	0.193*** [1.213] (0.009)	0.194*** [1.214] (0.009)	0.130*** [1.139] (0.015)
Observations	501,663	501,663	501,663	501,663
Assortative mating controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Labor market controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Educ × Age FE	No	Yes	No	No
Educ × Age × Profession FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Macro area FE	No	No	No	Yes
Year and Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

This Table reports Cox regression coefficient estimates and hazard rates (in squared brackets) of the risk of separation in relation to the cultural distance between spouses. The sample includes interethnic marriages between a native and a foreign spouse. I consider different measures of cultural distance: along genetics, language, religion, and values, in panel a, b, c, and d, respectively. All cultural distance measures are standardized. Assortative mating controls account for assortative mating dimensions in terms of age, education, and past marital history of spouses, as reported in Table 1 (main draft). Labor market controls include dummies for the professional attainment of spouses (blue-collar, white-collar, director, self-employed, and entrepreneur). A dummy for prenuptial financial agreement (disjoint vs. joint management of family wealth) is also included. Column (2) includes spouses' education interacted with age of marriage fixed effects. Column (3) includes education interacted with age of marriage interacted with professional attainment of spouses fixed effects. Column (4) controls for the macro area of origin of the foreign spouses, for the classification of foreign countries by macro area see Table A4. Region and year of marriage fixed effects are included in all specifications. Standard errors clustered by province (99 provinces) are reported in parentheses. Significance level: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

foreign women respond less to a similar increase in cultural distance compared to intermarriages involving foreign men. For instance, an increase of one standard deviation in the genetic distance leads to an increase of about 4.2 percent in the risk of separation of intermarriages between native men and foreign women (sample b.), while the same increase in genetic distance augments the risk of separation by 11.4 percent for interethnic marriages between native women and immigrant men (sample c.). The same pattern applies to all other measures of cultural distance with the only exception represented by distance in values, see panels b., c., and d. of Fig. A3. Finally, I show that results are robust and even stronger in magnitude

considering the sample of immigrant marriages involving at least one immigrant spouse, i.e., including both interethnic and immigrant marriages (sample d.).

4.2 Economic and other channels

I provide evidence of a foreign-spouse gender gap in marital instability, and I show that gender differences are explained by cultural differences, with immigrants more dissimilar from natives' cultural environment being systematically more at risk of separation. Next, I investigate mechanisms complementary to cultural explanations that could have reinforced the foreign-spouse gender gap. I start by examining the role of economic factors, focusing on labor market participation and the economic independence of immigrant women.

I investigate the contribution of economic factors by exploiting additional data on female labor market participation. In 2015, ISTAT conducted a representative survey on time-use (*Multipurpose Survey on Households: Citizenship and Free Time*), measuring, among other things, female participation in the labor market. In Table 4, I compare female labor market outcomes between homogamous and interethnic couples by gender of the foreign spouse. Estimates include province and year of marriage fixed effects and control for spouses' observables in terms of age and education and, importantly, for Italian language proficiency of the immigrant spouse. Coherently with Guetto & Azzolini (2014)'s evidence, columns (1) and (2) confirm that immigrant women in interethnic couples are 10 percentage points less likely to work and supply, on average, 3.5 hours less of market work per week, whereas native women married to immigrant men are not statistically different from native women in homogamous marriages with an average probability of working equal to 47 percent and supply, on average, 15 hours of work per week. Column (3) reveals no differences in terms of labor market position. Moving from actual choices to beliefs, I exploit additional data on time-use from the *Multipurpose Survey: Use of Time* conducted by ISTAT in 2013. Column (5) confirms that marriages between native men and immigrant women are 11.5 percentage points more likely to follow traditional gender roles²¹ compared to homogamous couples, which display a mean probability of adherence to traditional gender roles equal to 48 percent. The opposite is true for interethnic couples comprising native women and immigrant men, as they are 13 percentage points less likely to follow traditional gender role norms. Because lower female labor participation and traditional gender roles penalize female economic independence in interethnic marriages, they can also affect separation choices.²²

²¹ Traditional gender roles are defined as follows: "The man devotes himself mainly to economic needs and the woman to take care of the household".

²² I further exploit data from the *Multipurpose Survey: Use of Time* of 2013 to study whether labor market outcomes are explained by cultural distance, once controlling for the set of observables used in the main analysis. Results reported in column (1) of Table A5 show that cultural distance does not predict male and female participation in the labor market in panels a. and b. in turn. Indeed, the coefficient associated with genetic distance is close to zero and well-estimated. The same conclusion applies to additional labor market outcomes describing labor market quality, i.e., whether the spouse works in a high-level position in column (2) and labor supply intensity in columns (3) and (4), i.e., the number of days and the number of hours of work per week. Results are also robust to alternative sample selection and diverse cultural distance measures.

Table 4 Economic drivers: female labor market outcomes by family

Dep. var.	(1) Female works	(2) Hrs of work (week)	(3) High position	(4) Female works	(5) Traditional roles	(6) Exit marriage
Homogamous (reference group)						
Interethnic - Foreign wife	- 0.105*** (0.027)	- 3.496*** (1.263)	0.029 (0.023)	- 0.207*** (0.033)	0.115*** (0.037)	- 0.056*** (0.003)
Interethnic - Foreign husband	0.057 (0.036)	0.931 (1.338)	0.012 (0.021)	0.042 (0.067)	- 0.129 * (0.068)	0.054*** (0.003)
Immigrant	- 0.084* (0.045)	- 2.504 (1.887)	- 0.037* (0.022)	- 0.156*** (0.035)	0.226*** (0.024)	0.036*** (0.005)
Observations	6456	6456	6456	7748	7134	300,196
R-squared	0.182	0.162	0.043	0.274	0.200	0.536
Mean dep. var (reference group)	0.471	14.995	0.078	0.491	0.483	0.152
Individuals controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year (marriage) FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year (separation) FE	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Data Source	Multipurpose Survey on Households Citizenship and Free time (2015)			Multipurpose Survey on Households Use of Time (2013)		Separation

This table reports differences in female labor market outcomes and adherence to traditional gender roles between homogamous and interethnic couples by gender of the immigrant spouse. Estimates in columns (1–3) exploit survey data from the *Multipurpose Survey on Households: Citizenship and Free time* (2015); estimates in columns (4–5) exploit data on labor outcomes and role models from the *Multipurpose Survey on Households: Use of time* (2013); estimates in column (6) refer to administrative data on separations (1995–2012). The dependent variables include in column (1) an indicator for whether the female spouse works outside the household; in column (2) the number of hours of work outside the household; in column (3) an indicator for whether the female spouse works in a high-level position; in column (4) an indicator for whether the female spouse works outside the household; in column (5) an indicator for couples that agree with the statement “It is better for the family that the man devotes himself mainly to economic needs and the woman to take care of the household”; in column (6) an indicator for whether the wife alone submitted the request for separation. The explanatory variables are binary indicators for interethnic couples by gender of the foreign spouse and immigrant couples, while the omitted category includes homogeneous native couples. Individual controls include spouses’ age and education, and whether or not foreign spouses speak Italian. Province and year of marriage (and separation) fixed effects are included in all specifications (in column 6). Standard errors clustered by province (99 provinces) are reported in parentheses. Significance level: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

By focusing on column (6), labor market asymmetries are shown to be consistent with immigrant women being 5 percentage points less likely to initiate a separation (in disjoint separation procedures) when married to native men, as compared to native women in interethnic couples, from an average rate of 15 percent.²³

I conclude by exploring another potential mechanism related to anticipated differences in judicial dispositions after separation. I investigate the presence of (judicial) differences in post-dissolution agreements between interethnic marriages, inducing immigrant women married to native men to reconsider their separation in the face of potentially more severe conditions, and I find little support for this mechanism. Specifically, in Table A6, I explore differences in alimony obligations and family home disposition arrangements in columns (1) and (2). I do not find meaningful and economically relevant differences in alimony rights of female immigrant versus native spouses. Estimates control for age, education, and past marital history of both spouses, as well as year and location fixed effects. In column (3), I find systematic differences in home destination, with immigrant women being less likely to receive the home compared to native women, potentially induced by differences in ex-ante property, which I am not able to disregard. Finally, I hypothesize that gender asymmetries in the likelihood of children's custody may affect the propensity towards dissolution (Dohmen et al. 2012). Column (4) shows that immigrant mothers married to native men are less likely to obtain their children's custody after separation. However, point estimates are limited in magnitude. Overall, these results suggest that anticipated differences in post-dissolution agreements are not a significant force driving the observed differential in the marital stability of interethnic families based on gender.

5 Conclusions

Migration inflows profoundly reshape Western societies' sociocultural landscapes, potentially affecting marriage and separation choices. I examine whether endogamy (i.e., marrying within the same cultural-ethnic group) influences separation due to differences in cultural values and traditions. Analyzing marriages in Italy from 1995 to 2012, a period of increasing immigration, I find higher separation risks in interethnic marriages, with a 6.4 percentage point difference between native women-immigrant men and native men-immigrant women. These gender differences reflect cultural disparities, with cultural distance measures predicting marital dissolution; the degree of cultural diversity between spouses is crucial in explaining dissolution choices. I also explore economic factors, such as labor market participation and immigrant women's independence, that may contribute to the foreign-spouse gender gap.

From a broader perspective, these findings underscore the pivotal role of successful integration policies in reducing cultural barriers and negative attitudes toward immigrants. If implemented effectively, these policies can impact both the prevalence

²³ Overall, the vast majority of couples (75 percent) submit a joint demand of marital dissolution. Concerning disjoint cases, separations are mainly initiated by the wife's unilateral preferences, 15 percent on average, and significant differences across families and gender of the immigrant spouse emerge.

and stability of interethnic marriages, with potentially far-reaching effects on future generations.

Data availability I include data declarations within the cover letter attached to the main manuscript.

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-025-09812-2>.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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