

Received: 23 November 2022 Accepted: 6 March 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v20i2.2857>

## Is the Combination of the Nationalities of the Couple Affecting Women's Fertility Intentions? Insights from Italy

Thaís García-Pereiro<sup>1</sup>, Roberta Pace<sup>2</sup>, Anna Paterno<sup>3</sup>, and Daniele Spizzichino<sup>4</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Recently, there has been a rising interest on migrants' fertility intentions (FIs). However, to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies have investigated the role played by the combination of the nationalities of the couple on women's short-term intentions of having a(nother) child. This article is aimed at contributing to the existing literature on the subject by filling this gap, testing whether and how women's FIs differ according to the type of couple (native, mixed and migrant couples) while disentangling the influence of the selection and socialization or adaptation hypotheses. Data drawn from two ISTAT surveys were harmonized and merged for multivariate analyses. Results shown that both individual and couples' characteristics matter in shaping differences in FIs between foreign women partnered to Italian men and foreign women partnered to foreign men. Simultaneously, the FIs gap between foreign women partnered to Italian men and Italian women partnered to Italian men also decreased, giving support to the adaptation theory. Finally, findings point out to the presence of gradients in the explanatory power of the adaptation hypothesis to differences in FIs across groups of migrant women according to their area of nationality.*

**Keywords:** *Fertility intentions; type of couple; migrants; selection; adaptation; Italy*

### **Introduction**

The social impact of immigrants in receiving countries, measured in terms of family formation, fertility rates and entry into the labor market, is highly relevant for tracking and evaluating their adaptation and integration processes (Andersson and Scott, 2007; Yeter and Stichnoth, 2013).

A large bulk of studies analyzed natives' fertility intentions (FIs, hereinafter) (Régnier-Loilier and Vignoli, 2011; Balbo and Mills, 2011; Gatta et al., 2021; Novelli et al., 2021) and literature on migrants' FIs grown significantly in recent years (Kraus and Castro-Martín, 2018; Puur et al., 2018; Carlsson, 2018; Alderotti et al., 2022-forthcoming). However, to the best of our knowledge, none of the former investigated the role that the combination of partners' nationalities may play in individual's intentions to have a(another) child.

Filling this gap is particularly relevant for research on migration and fertility because fertility behaviors and outcomes tend to vary greatly according to the type of couple (Coleman, 1994;

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<sup>1</sup>University of Bari Aldo Moro, Department of Political Sciences, Bari, Italy. Corresponding Author.

E-mail: [t.garcia.pereiro@uniba.it](mailto:t.garcia.pereiro@uniba.it)

<sup>2</sup>University of Bari Aldo Moro, Department of Political Sciences, Bari, Italy. E-mail: [roberta.pace@uniba.it](mailto:roberta.pace@uniba.it)

<sup>3</sup>University of Bari Aldo Moro, Department of Political Sciences, Bari, Italy. E-mail: [anna.paterno@uniba.it](mailto:anna.paterno@uniba.it)

<sup>4</sup>Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), Roma, Italy. E-mail: [daspizzi@istat.it](mailto:daspizzi@istat.it) The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author and do not bind the institution to which he belongs.

**Acknowledgement:** The authors acknowledge the financial support provided by the MIUR-PRIN Grant N. 2017W5B55Y (GDR project "The Great Demographic Recession", PI: Daniele Vignoli).

Fu, 2008; Maffioli et al., 2012) and FIs -especially if certain- are good predictors of future reproductive behaviors (Schoen et al., 1999; Toulemon and Testa, 2005; Fahlén and Oláh, 2018). Additionally, FIs reflect childbearing norms of social and cultural groups, being remarkably helpful to analyze adaptation and integration processes of migrants while shifting from the norms of their country of origin to those of the country of settlement (Puur et al., 2018).

Italy becomes a particularly interesting case of study for this subject if we consider that, first, there has been a systematic and consistent increase in marriages and births among foreign couples and Italian-foreign couples over time<sup>5</sup>; and second, previous research identified differences in characteristics and behaviors between mixed and endogamous couples (Maffioli and Paterno, 2008; Maffioli et al., 2012; Gabrielli and Paterno, 2015; Guetto and Azzolini, 2015; Vitali and Fraboni, 2020), differences that gain relevance if we consider the contribution of foreigners to fertility levels (Mussino and Strozza, 2012).

This paper is aimed at contributing to the existing literature by filling this gap while testing the influence of the combination of nationalities of the members of the couple on short-term FIs. More specifically, our analyses unravel and quantify the influence of the selection, socialization and adaptation hypotheses in positive and certain FIs of women in mixed (foreign woman-Italian man) and endogamous couples (Italian woman-Italian man, foreign woman-foreign man). Finally, as differences also emerge when dealing with different origins (Impicciatore et al., 2020; Mussino et al., 2021; Carella et al., 2021; García-Pereiro and Paterno, 2022), we also disaggregate information in wider groups of nationalities to search for differences in FIs.

## Theories and hypotheses

Several theories were developed to analyze changes in migrants' fertility behaviors while settling in host societies<sup>6</sup>. In this paper, our central aim is to apply the selection, socialization and adaptation approaches to further unravel and explain differences on FIs based on of the combination of nationalities of the members of the couple in Italy.

According to the selection approach, migrants are selected based on both observable (i.e.: sociodemographic and economic characteristics) and non-observable characteristics (i.e.: cultural) that may be supporting the emergence of fertility patterns that resemble more accurately those of the population of the host country rather than those of the population of the country of origin (Goldstein and Goldstein, 1984). Then, the composition of migrants in terms of such characteristics may be responsible -at least in part- for fertility differentials between migrants and stayers (Kahn, 1988; Milewski, 2010; Wolf and Mulder, 2019; Lindström et al., 2022).

According to the socialization approach, the only responsible for future reproductive choices and outcomes is the social context at which migrants were exposed during childhood, given that values and norms experienced at the country in which they lived their socialization period tend to prevail (Andersson, 2004; Kulu, 2005; Kulu and Milewski, 2007). Thus, migrant

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<sup>5</sup> According to ISTAT data, the share of births from couples of foreigners increased from 3.9% in 1999 to 15.1% in 2012 (15% in 2019) and those from mixed couples passed from 1.5% in 1999 to 4.2% in 2012 (5.2% 2019).

<sup>6</sup> For more comprehensive overviews of these frameworks (adaptation, socialization, selection, disruption and interrelation) please refer to Milieswki (2010) and Kulu and González-Ferrer (2014).



behaviors do not converge to those of natives because they tend to resemble those of the stayers. This holds if reproductive decisions of stayers differ from those of natives.

Finally, for the adaptation approach, the reproductive decisions of migrants while living in the host country are more likely to resemble those of natives rather than those of stayers (Kulu, 2005; Kulu and González-Ferrer, 2014). This convergence of behaviors is commonly attributed to the fact that migrants are exposed to the same context than natives in the country of settlement (Hirschman, 1994; Hotz et al., 1997).

Undoubtedly, it remains essentially relevant to consider the role that migrants' integration may play on the maintenance of their FIs (socialization) or on their convergence towards those of natives (adaptation). In this sense, there is commonly agreed that mixed couples promote and facilitate integration of the foreign member of the couple (Kulu and González-Ferrer, 2014). As found by Puur et al. (2018), the gap between native and migrant's fertility intentions gets significantly reduced if their level of integration is high.

Based on this theoretical and empirical background and considering intergroup differences on fertility intentions, we formulate the following research hypotheses:

*RH1 Selection.* If there is a selection of migrants, and considering that individuals engaged in mixed couples tend to have different characteristics than individuals who engage in endogamous relationships (Casacchia et al., 2003), we expect that taking into account individual and couple characteristics would change differences on FIs between foreign women partnered to Italian men and foreign women partnered to foreign men.

Once controlling for differences between foreign women partnered to Italian men or to foreign men, we can further test for the rest of our research hypotheses, as follows.

*RH2 Socialization or Adaptation.* FIs of foreign women partnered to Italian men will resemble those of foreign women partnered to foreign men if socialization holds; or, instead, will resemble those of Italian women partnered to Italian men, finding support for adaptation. Finally, as migrants' fertility is shaped by different norms or migratory projects (Impicciatore et al., 2020; Mussino et al., 2021; Alderotti and Trappolini, 2021; Carella et al., 2021; García-Pereiro and Paterno, 2022), we also hypothesize changes on the explanatory levels of Socialization vs Adaptation to FIs across different migrant origins of women partnered to Italian men.

## Data and methods

Data are drawn from two different surveys conducted by the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). The reason behind this choice regards data limitations. On one hand, the last available survey on Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle (FSS 2016) did not sample a sufficiently numerous contingent of respondents with foreign citizenship (Castagnaro and Meli, 2022). On the other, the survey on Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens (SCIF 2011/12) did not include nationals, except for national partners of respondents (Ciavardini et al., 2018). Thus, as surveys complement each other, and considering that information on short-term FIs and other information of interest is available in both surveys, data were carefully harmonized in one unique dataset in which most part of national couples (Italian woman-Italian man) are drawn from the FSS (97.8%) and most mixed (Foreign woman-Italian man) (90%) and non-national (Foreign woman-Foreign man) (92.5%) couples

come from SCIF. To accurately disentangle the role of the combination of nationalities, our analyses look at partnered women<sup>7</sup>, with or without children, aged 18-45 for a total sample of 5,901.

The dependent variable of multivariate analyses identifies respondents' certain intentions to have a child within the next three years coded as: "certainly yes" vs "probably yes", "probably not", and "certainly not". We estimate binary logistic regression models considering independent variables already identified by the literature as important individual determinants of FIs (Carlsson, 2018; Puur et al., 2018, Carella et al., 2021; Liversage, 2021; Mussino et al., 2021) together with couple-related characteristics (Gabrielli and Paterno, 2015; Guetto and Azzolini, 2015; Vitali and Fraboni, 2020)<sup>8</sup>. Our main variable of interest combines the nationality of the woman with the one of her partner distinguishing among foreign woman partnered to Italian man (mixed couple), Italian woman partnered to Italian man (endogamous native couple) and foreign woman partnered to foreign man (endogamous foreign couple). For a more precise interpretation of our results, we computed Adjusted Predictions for Prototypical Cases (APPCs, hereinafter, by couple's combination of nationalities, while keeping the rest of variables at their mean values).

### **Identifying and explaining differences on women's FIs based on couples' combination of nationalities**

The first part of this section is dedicated to the identification and quantification of the influence of the combination of nationalities of women respondents and their partners on the likelihood of having positive and certain FIs. To test for selection (*RH1*) and socialization or adaptation (*RH2*), we computed APPCs in two diverse settings. The first can be considered a sort of a null model in which we can observe the raw effect of the combination of nationalities on positive and certain FIs (Figure 1<sub>(a)</sub>). The second, instead, results from a full model that includes all covariates under examination (Figure 1<sub>(b)</sub>).

In general, we can observe a clear ranking in woman's positive FIs when considering her nationality and that of her partner. In particular (Figure 1<sub>(a)</sub>), FIs of foreign women partnered to Italian men (16%) seem to be much closer to those of foreign women partnered to foreign men (20.1%) rather than to those of Italian women partnered to Italian men (8.8%). However, the inclusion of covariates in model estimations<sup>9</sup> has a clear reductive effect on fertility intentions for the three observed groups (Figure 1<sub>(b)</sub>) also changing the previously registered closeness between pairs of categories. In fact, FIs of foreign women partnered to Italian men

<sup>7</sup> We were forced to restrict the analyses due to data limitations. First, foreigners partnered to foreigners of different nationalities (222) and Italian women partnered to foreign men (278) were excluded from the sample given their small numbers. Second, the final sample was restricted to women only because male respondents involved in a mixed couple on both surveys only accounted for around 1.3% of the total merged sample.

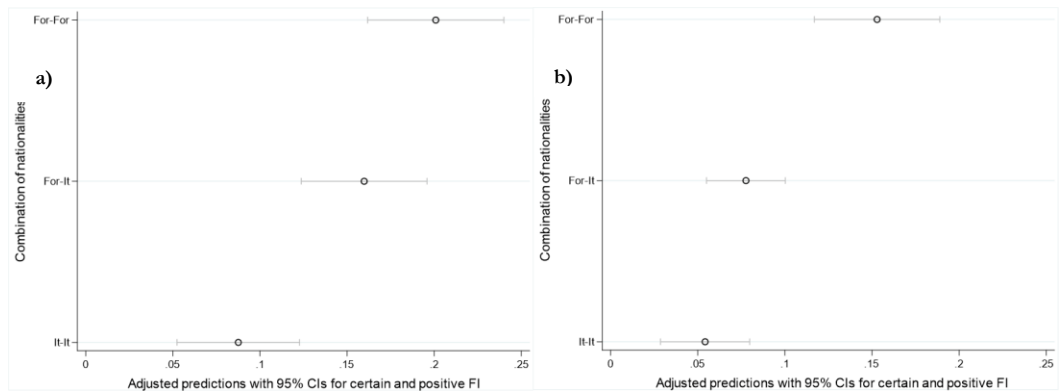
<sup>8</sup> More specifically models included: self-reported health status (good/very good, other), parity (0,1,2,3+), cohabiting or married couple, NUTS1 of residence (Northeast, Northwest, Center, South and Islands), and the combination of the following characteristics between partners age (Same age +/-3, older partner, younger partner), educational level (homogamy tertiary, homogamy secondary II, homogamy minor level, partner higher than respondent, respondent higher than partner) and employment status (Male Bread Winner, Female Bread Winner, both working, none working). Short-term fertility intentions are cross-sectional (asked for at the time of the survey), thus, to control for this possible shortcoming bias, a dummy variable identifying the survey (FSS, SCIF) was included.

<sup>9</sup> According to our results, control variables positively affecting certain and positive FIs are having self-reported a good-very good health status and being married (rather than cohabiting), while intentions are negatively affected by increasing parity, educational homogamy (at secondary or lower levels) and living in a Female Breadwinner couple. Results are shown in Table A of the Appendix.



(7.8%) got significantly reduced and are now only slightly higher to those of Italian women partnered to Italian men (5.4%) and much distant to those of foreign women partnered to foreign men (15.3%). This is the consequence of the greatest reduction in the likelihood of having declared positive and certain FIs occurred among foreign women partnered to Italian men after the inclusion of covariates. As positive and certain FIs decrease after controlling for compositional differences in the characteristics of the respondent and the couple, foreign women partnered to Italian men seem to be selected if compared to foreign women partnered to foreign men. A finding that is supporting our first hypothesis (*RH1 Selection*).

**Figure 1.** Adjusted Predictions of certain and positive FIs by couples' combination of nationalities (95%CI) without (a) and with (b) control variables hold at mean values.



*Notes:* b) models control for survey, respondents' health status, place of birth, parity and NUTS3 residence, marriage or cohabitation and couples' combination of age, educational level and employment status. Full model in Appendix (Table A).

*Source:* own elaboration on merged and harmonized data.

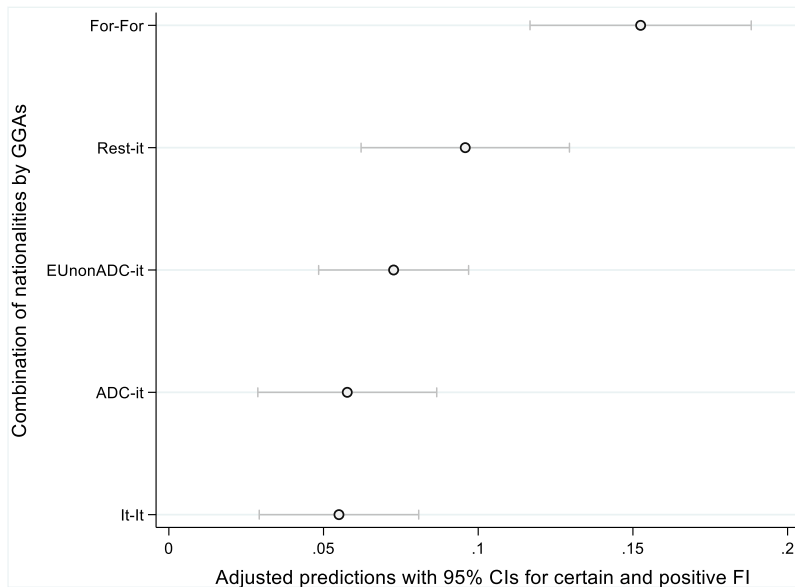
We now can test for socialization vs adaptation comparing the likelihoods of women to be certainly intended to have a(nother) child between foreign women partnered to Italian men and foreign women partnered to foreign men, in the first case, and between foreign women partnered to Italian men and Italian women partnered to Italian men, in the second. As shown in Figure 1(b), foreign women partnered to Italian men have a likelihood of positive and certain FIs that resemble more accurately those of Italian women partnered to Italian men (7.8% vs 5.4%), and which values are much lower than those declared by foreign women partnered to foreign men (7.8% vs 15.3%). This result is supporting adaptation in our second hypothesis (*RH2 Socialization or Adaptation*).

In this second part, we examine whether and how the explanatory power of the adaptation approach to FIs differs across different migrant origins of women partnered to Italian men. Thus, we further split the category of foreign women partnered to Italian men in three subcategories<sup>10</sup> according to the Great Geographical Areas (GGAs) at which her nationality correspond, as follows: Advanced Developed Countries (ADC, including European Union, Canada, USA and Australia), European countries -not ADC (New EU countries and Middle Eastern Europe), and the remaining nationalities (Rest: Africa, Asia and Latin America).

<sup>10</sup> We are completely aware that a more detailed classification would be prefer but small sample sizes did not allow us to further disaggregate groups of nationalities.

Adjusted predictions displayed on Figure 2 show a clear adaptational gradient as illustrated by differences among foreign women partnered to Italian men and between them and Italian women partnered to Italian men or foreign women partnered to foreign men.

**Figure 2.** Adjusted Predictions of certain and positive FIs by couples' combination of nationalities disaggregated in Great Geographical Areas (GGAs) (95%CI).



*Notes:* models control for survey, respondents' health status, place of birth, parity and NUTS3 residence, marriage or cohabitation and couples' combination of age, educational level and employment status. Full model in Appendix (Table B).

*Source:* own elaboration on merged and harmonized data.

Regarding intragroup differences among foreign women partnered to Italian men, we find that foreign women from ADC have the lowest likelihood to be certainly intended to have a(nother) child (5.8%), closely followed by those from other European countries (non-ADC) (7.7%), and far from those from the last subcategory (9.9%).

The intergroup differences observed, further confirm our second hypothesis, pushing us to question the explanatory power of the adaptation hypothesis when analyzing certain and positive FIs of foreign women from Asia, Africa and Latin America partnered to Italian men (9.6%). In fact, their intentions are almost exactly halfway through those of Italian women partnered to Italian men (5.5%) and those of foreign women partnered to foreign men (15.2%). The contrary holds for foreign women from ADC partnered to Italian men (5.8%), whose FIs resemble those of Italian women partnered to Italian men. A similar situation is observed among women from European countries (non-ADC) (7.7%), whose FIs are also closer to those of Italian women partnered to Italian men but to a lesser extent.

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper was aimed at analyzing the effect of the combination of nationalities of the members of the couple on short-term FIs, disentangling the influence of the selection and socialization or adaptation hypotheses. Consistent with recent literature on migrants' fertility (Impicciatore et al., 2020; Mussino et al., 2021; García-Pereiro and Paterno, 2022), we found



important differences in having certain and positive intentions to have a(nother) child between foreign women partnered to Italian men, foreign women partnered to foreign men and Italian women partnered to Italian men.

The findings led us to accept our first hypothesis (*RH1 Selection*), according to which both individual and couples' characteristics play a role in shaping differences in FIs between foreign women partnered to Italian men and foreign women partnered to foreign men. This result is in agreement with those of Bagavos et al. (2008), Wolf and Mulder (2018) and Tønnessen and Mussino (2020) regarding fertility differentials of migrants in other European countries, but also with those of Puur et al. (2018), who also reported migrant selectivity as a potential explanation for differences on FIs between migrants and non-migrants.

Judging from our results, changes in FIs associated with the inclusion of control variables in model specifications were extremely important, generating a decrease in FIs of foreign women partnered to Italian men that widens differences with those of foreign women partnered to foreign men. This likely arose from the fact that, in mixed couples, the foreigner -which is more likely to be woman- tend to be younger and more educated than the native (Gabrielli and Paterno, 2015; Guetto and Azzolini, 2015; Vitali and Fraboni, 2020). Another important effect might be related to the lower and later fertility of mixed couples -if compared to endogamous couples- and to the higher likelihood to have had previous relationships and children of women engaged in mixed unions (Maffioli and Paterno, 2008; Maffioli et al., 2012).

Simultaneously, this change also resulted in a reduction of the gap in FIs between foreign women partnered to Italian men and Italian women partnered to Italian men, giving support to the adaptation theory in our second research hypothesis (*RH2 Socialization or Adaptation*). This accords with recent research on the Italian case (García-Pereiro and Paterno, 2022), which found support for adaptation in the case of Romanian and Albanian migrant women; but contrast with findings of Puur et al. (2018) which rejected the adaptation hypothesis observing that childbearing intentions of Russians living in Estonia better resemble those of the population in the country of origin. This contrast between findings raises intriguing questions regarding the extent to which these explanations remain solid and valid when studying different origins and destinations, being FIs strongly related to the specificities of migratory projects and their conjunction and diversity in host countries.

Thus, our results are clearly pointing out to the presence of gradients in the explanatory power of the adaptation hypothesis to differences in FIs across groups of women under observation, further supporting the idea of the presence of fertility differentials according to the heterogeneity of the characteristics of both the head and the migratory project (Impicciatore et al., 2020; Carella et al., 2021). In our analysis, the explanatory power of the adaptation theory to FIs of foreign women partnered to Italian men did change -as expected- but, somewhat surprisingly, this change was not large enough to cause the shift of the theory from adaptation to socialization. In fact, this hypothesis seems to fit much better in the case of foreign women from ADC and other European countries partnered to Italian men, whose FIs are much closer to those of Italian women partnered to Italian men. Instead, it seems to lose some of its explanatory power in the case of foreign women from Asia, Africa and Latino America partnered to Italian men, even if their FIs remained closer to those of Italian women partnered to Italian men rather than to those of foreign women partnered to foreign men. It is encouraging to compare these findings with those of Mussino et al. (2021) who found the highest probability of intending to have a child among African women, and the lowest among

Albanian, Romanian, Eastern European women, and also natives of most developed countries.

Unlike much recent research on migrant's FIs and following inputs coming from Puur et al. (2018), our study focused on the combination between the nationality of woman with that of her partner, which allowed to reach more comprehensive insights into childbearing intentions of migrants. Aside from the former, the contribution of our study to the literature stems not only from the methodological development of harmonizing and merging data from different sources but also from the inclusion of several variables that granted us to accurately compare women according to the characteristics of the couple in which they were engaged and connect these to changes in their FIs. However, in our attempt to shed further light on this subject, we also faced some constraints. The most important one regards data limitations that did not allowed us to include neither men nor other combinations nor disaggregation of nationalities due to the presence of very small samples. Further replications would be desirable to check the robustness of our findings. Although, considering that existing datasets alone do not have extensive information on all possible couples' combination of nationalities, we strongly believe that our research remains an innovative and important contribution to the study of migrants' FIs.

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## Appendix

**Table A.** Results of binary logistic regression models on women's positive and certain fertility intentions. Main independent variable of interest: Combination of nationalities.

	Null model		Full model	
	Odds ratio	sig.	Odds ratio	sig.
<i>Combination of nationalities</i>				
(Italian woman-Italian man)				
Foreign woman-Italian man	1.98		1.47	**
Foreign woman-foreign man	2.62		3.15	***
<i>Individual characteristics</i>				
<i>Parity</i>				
(Childless)				
1			0.34	***
2			0.05	***
3+			0.04	***
Good/very good health			1.37	**
<i>NUT3 of residence</i>				
(North-west)				
North-east			1.14	
Center			0.83	
South&Islands			0.92	*
Foreign born			0.44	**
<i>Couple characteristics</i>				
<i>Age combination</i>				
(Homo-same age-)				
Hyper partner+3			1.01	*
Hypo partner-3			0.92	
<i>Education combination</i>				
(Homogamy tertiary)				
Homogamy secondaryII			0.68	*
Homogamy lower			0.57	**
Hyper partner+			0.78	
Hypo partner-			0.73	*
<i>Employment combination</i>				
(Dual income)				
Male BW			1.44	***
Female BW			0.44	***



Not working		1.39	***
Married couple		1.39	***
<i>Survey</i>			
(SCIF)			
FSS		0.41	***
_cons	0.24	0.66	
N	5,901	5,901	
Log likelihood	-2464.99	-1983.14	
Pseudo R2	0.03	0.21	

Notes: (reference categories); \* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001.

Source: own elaboration on merged and harmonized data.

**Table B.** Results of binary logistic regression models on women's positive and certain fertility intentions. Main independent variable of interest: Combination of nationalities by foreign women GGA of nationality.

	Odds ratio	sig.
<i>Combination of nationalities</i>		
(Italian woman-Italian man)		
ADC woman-Italian man	1.05	*
EUnonADC woman-Italian man	1.35	*
Rest woman-Italian man	1.82	*
Foreign woman-foreign man	3.09	***
<i>Individual characteristics</i>		
<i>Parity</i>		
(Childless)		
1	0.34	***
2	0.05	***
3+	0.04	***
Good/very good health	1.36	**
<i>NUT3 of residence</i>		
(North-west)		
North-east	1.15	
Center	0.83	
South&Islands	0.93	
Foreign born	0.46	**
<i>Couple characteristics</i>		
<i>Age combination</i>		
(Homo-same age-)		
Hyper partner+3	1.01	
Hypo partner-3	0.91	
<i>Education combination</i>		
(Homogamy tertiary)		
Homogamy secondaryII	0.66	*
Homogamy lower	0.55	**
Hyper partner+	0.75	
Hypo partner-	0.72	*
<i>Employment combination</i>		
(Dual income)		
Male BW	1.42	***
Female BW	0.44	***
Not working	1.37	*
Married couple	1.34	***
<i>Survey</i>		
(SCIF)		

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FSS	0.41	***
_cons	0.69	
N	5,901	
Log likelihood	-1980.88	
Pseudo R2	0.21	

Notes: (reference categories); \* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001.

Source: own elaboration on merged and harmonized data.

