Gender Inequalities and Territorial Polarization: Sectoral Employment Structures in Italy

In recent decades, socio-spatial inequalities in European labor markets have intensified, reflecting growing territorial polarization in economic structures and employment opportunities. Italy represents a particularly illustrative case of these dynamics, with persistent disparities between macro-regions—namely the North, Centre, and South—that manifest not only in employment rates and wage levels but also in job quality and sectoral specialization patterns. This paper investigates how the structure of sectoral employment in Italy contributes to the reproduction of social and territorial inequalities, with a specific focus on gender and migration status. The regional science and labor economics literature has long highlighted the crucial role of territorial economic specialization in shaping labor market outcomes. Sectoral segregation, especially along gender and migration lines, reinforces mechanisms of social exclusion and labor market segmentation. Regional economies concentrated in low-productivity sectors typically provide lower-quality jobs, characterized by instability, low wages, and limited career progression. These jobs disproportionately attract or are imposed upon women and migrant workers, thereby exacerbating inequalities and deepening socio-economic divides across regions. This paper builds on the intersection of regional development studies, labor market segmentation theory, and intersectionality to examine how sectoral employment structures function as a transmission mechanism of disadvantage. It posits that the interaction between individual characteristics (such as gender and migration status) and territorial contexts (macro-regional specialization) determines access to different segments of the labour market and influences the risk of labor market vulnerability and social exclusion.

The main objectives of the study are threefold. To map the sectoral distribution of employment across Italian macro-regions, identifying patterns of concentration and specialization. To examine the degree of occupational segregation by gender and migration status within these sectoral structures. To estimate the probability of employment in low-quality sectors as a function of individual and territorial characteristics, highlighting interlocking forms of disadvantage.

The empirical analysis draws on microdata from the Italian Labour Force Survey (LFS), using sectoral classifications at three levels of aggregation (CAT12, CAT5, CAT3) to capture the nuances of economic activity across regions. This fine-grained classification allows for a precise understanding of how different territories specialize in specific economic sectors and how this influences employment allocation. The analytical strategy combines a descriptive statistics and concentration indices, to measure regional sectoral specialization and segregation. A Segregation indices, such as the Duncan Index, to quantify gender and migrant concentration in specific sectors and an econometric modelling, specifically multinomial logistic regression, to estimate the likelihood of being employed in low-productivity sectors based on gender, migration status, education, and region of residence.

Preliminary Findings

Initial results reveal a strong pattern of socio-spatial polarization in Italy's labor market. The Northern regions show high concentrations of employment in manufacturing, high-tech industries, and advanced services—sectors associated with higher productivity, stronger contractual protections, and better working conditions. Conversely, the Southern regions are disproportionately specialized in low-value-added services, informal retail, and agriculture—sectors characterized by lower job quality, informality, and economic vulnerability. These sectoral patterns have direct implications for gender and migrant segregation. Women are predominantly employed in education, healthcare, and social services. However, in Southern Italy, many are also concentrated in low-paid, informal, and precarious service roles—often without formal contracts or social protections. Migrant workers, particularly those from non-EU countries, are overwhelmingly present in agriculture, domestic care, construction, and logistics. These sectors are not only less protected but also often operate within the informal economy, with high exposure to exploitation and job insecurity. The intersection of territorial location, gender, and migration status produces layered vulnerabilities. For example, a migrant woman living in the South has a substantially higher probability of being employed in a precarious, low-quality job than a native-born man in the North, even when controlling for education and work experience. This suggests that systemic barriers to decent employment extend beyond individual qualifications and are deeply embedded in structural and regional labor market dynamics.

Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings support the hypothesis that sectoral employment structures act as a key transmission channel through which socio-spatial inequalities are perpetuated. The territorial segmentation of the economy leads to unequal access to quality employment and concentrates on disadvantaged social groups in structurally weaker sectors. Such dynamics necessitate a territorially sensitive and inclusive approach to labor market policy. Addressing regional inequalities in Italy requires more than generic employment policies; it demands tailored strategies that consider the specific economic fabric and demographic profiles of each region. Key policy recommendations include promoting economic diversification in the South and other disadvantaged regions, with targeted investment in higher-value-added sectors (e.g. green economy, digital services, advanced manufacturing).Moreover, improving job quality across all sectors, particularly those with high female and migrant representation, through stronger labour protections, collective bargaining, and enforcement of labour standards. Furthermore, enhancing access to training and upskilling opportunities for women and migrants, with a focus on sectors with better career prospects and higher resilience to economic shocks. Finally, combating occupational segregation, through active labour market policies that address discriminatory hiring practices and support transitions into underrepresented sectors (e.g. encouraging women in STEM or skilled trades). The study highlights the need to consider intersectionality as a core principle in policy design. Gender- and migration-sensitive approaches must be integrated into regional development strategies to avoid reinforcing existing patterns of marginalization.

Contributions to the Literature

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on regional labour market disparities by linking detailed sectoral employment structures with socio-spatial inequality. Unlike studies that focus solely on macroeconomic indicators or employment rates, this work delves into the micro-level composition of employment to uncover how inequalities are structured and reproduced. The methodological approach—based on high-resolution sectoral data and intersectional analysis—offers a novel lens for understanding how gender and migration intersect with territorial disadvantages. In doing so, it challenges simplistic narratives of underdevelopment in Southern regions and calls for more complex, multi-dimensional analyses of labour market inequality.

Conclusion

In sum, the study demonstrates that territorial polarization in Italy is closely intertwined with sectoral employment structures, which in turn are shaped by and reproduce social inequalities. Women and migrants are systematically overrepresented in low-productivity, precarious sectors, particularly in economically weaker regions. These findings underscore the importance of regionally tailored, inclusive labour market policies aimed at reducing structural inequalities, improving job quality, and fostering balanced regional development. Without addressing the territorial and structural dimensions of labour market segmentation, efforts to promote social cohesion and equality in Italy will remain limited. Future research should continue to explore the links between sectoral dynamics, social stratification, and regional development to inform more equitable and effective policy interventions.