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THE INCREASE IN THE GENDER GAP WITH AGE: AN ANALYSIS  
ON ITALIAN NEETS

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**Abstract**

In Italy, small gender differences are present among “young” NEETs (not in education, employment or training, 15-24 years), while the gender gap increases considerably among “older” NEETs (25-34 years). We analyze the socioeconomic factors that influence the NEET gender gap, which increases with age. We consider regional data on four groups of NEETs (by age and gender) adopting a system generalized method of moments (SYS-GMM) estimator on a 2010-2018 panel dataset. Group analysis makes it possible to detect specific determinants (problems related to the study and work choices of young people) causes of the gap. Our results suggest that women are exposed to a higher risk of persistence in NEET status due to labor issues, while family/social obligations lose their influence with age. General economic and unemployment issues are connected to the NEET status mainly among men.

**JEL CODES:** E24; I25; R10; J16

**KEYWORDS:** GENDER INEQUALITIES; NEET; SCHOOL DROPOUT;  
UNEMPLOYMENT

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## **1. Introduction**

After the outbreak of the 2007-2008 crisis and its serious recessionary consequences, the social and economic situation has worsened for some categories and social groups at risk, because of unemployment issues (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011) and increasing inequalities (Mussida and Parisi, 2020). Among the weakest social groups, we find young people who are not employed or have low education. An increasingly share of these young people is represented by the so-called NEETs, which have been particularly badly affected by the worsening of job opportunities due to the lack of economic recovery (Scarpetta et al. 2010; Signorelli and Choudhry 2015).

Although the general worsening of conditions for young people are recognized as dramatic consequences of the Great Recession (Signorelli and Choudhry 2015), a generic reference to such category can lead to an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon. NEETs can be distinguished by age and by gender, and each group has distinct characteristics.

In this article we consider the situation in Italy, taking into account different groups of NEETs in the post-recession period. Our research starts by the empirical evidence suggesting a worrying increase in the gender gap between NEETs with age.

This situation is evident when comparing NEETs by age group: the 2009-2017 average NEET rate for males aged 15-24 was 20.5% and 20.1% for women. During the same period, the rate was only one percentage point higher for older males (25-34 years<sup>1</sup>), reaching 37.3% for women<sup>2</sup>.

This strong disparity implies that we do not detect clear gender gaps up to a certain age partly due to compulsory education—indeed the situation is slightly better for women—because such education takes place before society and the family, in several ways, discourage women from finding a job or continuing their studies.

Our research is aimed at investigating the underlying causes that worsen the condition of women with age (compared to control groups, i.e. young people and men).

This research seems relevant to the Italian case and applicable to less resilient contexts for many reasons. First, the direct relationship between increasing age and the risk of becoming a NEET is a phenomenon of social

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<sup>1</sup> Although this is an age group not usually associated with NEET status, the transition to adulthood in Italy is postponed due to habits, economic conditions, labor market characteristics (e.g., Aasve et al. 2001)

<sup>2</sup> Our elaborations on Eurostat data.

interest (see ILO 2016). Second, the difficulties that induce women in Italy to become NEETs with age are studied (from family commitments to lesser protections in some new contractual forms; see the literature review by Contini et al. 2019), and Italy is one of the advanced countries with the lowest labor participation rate for women, and particularly affected are those with family responsibilities (Del Boca 2002).

Our contribution to the literature follows studies that investigate different age groups of NEETs (e.g., Andersson et al. 2018), and we propose a double comparison of NEETs by both age and gender to determine whether other social constraints—in addition to the disparities present in the labor market—cause an increase in the NEET gender gap with increasing age. The goal of this comparison is to find specific policy solutions that may go beyond traditional public measures such as those for labor integration. For example, in Italy, we observe specific-group interventions to promote employment as the “Youth Guarantee” plan that is targeted to NEETs under 30 (e.g., training, internships) and contributory incentives to businesses with the aim of reducing gender gaps in specific sectors (the so-called “Fornero Law”).

To answer our research question, we investigate the influence of known causes of inactivity<sup>3</sup> on the NEET rates at the macro (regional) level for the period 2010-2018. The main causes include (i) labor opportunities and the importance of reaching an advanced education (which are captured by the unemployment rate (by age and gender)<sup>4</sup> and the school dropout rate<sup>5</sup>), (ii) family background (which influences the possibility of scholastic achievement and work success) and (iii) family/social commitments usually attributed to women (observed through marriage and early childbirth).

To account for reverse causality among the dependent variables (young and old NEET rates) and the unemployment and dropout rates—i.e., three phenomena that could influence each other—a SYS-GMM estimator is used with the panel dataset.

This article is organized as follows. In Section 2, we discuss two main facets of the NEET phenomenon related to our article: a brief explanation and

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<sup>3</sup> We refer generically to the inactivity of the young people involved, while we do not consider the subdivision of NEETs between inactive and unemployed (for lack of data availability).

<sup>4</sup> Job opportunities for men and women have decreased with the crisis, and if the gaps in unemployment have not increased much, it is because of worsening employment opportunities for men and, sometimes, because of the availability of the worst types of jobs for women (e.g., Castellano and Rocca 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The return to education in Italy is known to be very low (e.g., Cainarca and Sgobbi 2012). In addition, women pay more penalties than men with the same characteristics, and even more penalties than men among those with low levels of education (Mussida and Picchio 2014).

the international experience in terms of gender differences. In Section 3, we describe the data and econometric strategy. We present the results in Section 4, followed by our policy suggestions in Section 5.

## **2. Literature survey**

### *2.1 A brief explanation of the NEET phenomenon*

The NEET phenomenon reflects the progressive social precariousness, economic insecurity and often the greater social disparities that are present in many countries. The first attempts to represent this category of young people led to the formulation of the figure called “Status Zer0” (Istance et al. 1994), which seemed to indicate a lack of status with negative relevance (Furlong 2006). The NEET phenomenon was formally acknowledged only in the late 1990s in the Social Exclusion Unit report (1999) referred to the UK.

The definition provided by the International Labor Organization illustrates the variety of people involved: “*the NEET rate includes youth who are unemployed, unavailable to work due to illness, disability or family responsibilities, discouraged, or voluntarily NEET*” (ILO 2017, p. 21). The heterogeneity in the subjects affected implies that several different triggers must be identified and investigated. In general, the problem of inactivity connected to the NEET status arises when young people’s inability to adapt and oversensitivity to great social changes (Rahman 2007) combine with the negative effects of severe economic crises, particularly crises affecting members of the most vulnerable groups, e.g., by worsening the efficiency of the labor market (Scarpetta et al. 2010; Signorelli and Choudhry 2015)<sup>6</sup>. In this sense, the scant availability of suitable jobs and precarious employment situations (Standing 2011) related to the occupations of young people (Chung et al. 2012) can be considered determinants of discouragement.

The early interruption of studies and the scant availability of decent jobs for the youngest reinforce social weaknesses and the risk of economic inactivity, together implying a debasement of the role of young people in society (ILO 2017). Furthermore, opportunities that arise through family support remain important with respect to life experiences (Pitkänen et al.

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<sup>6</sup> An aspect that is repeated during crises over time is the underlying youth joblessness emergency that emerged in previous decades (Lynch and Richardson 1982) due to the link between the economic cycle and unemployment levels (ILO 2015), particularly for young people (Choudhry et al. 2012).

2021) and significantly affect the risk of inactivity behaviors (Alfieri et al. 2015).

The response of policymakers has sometimes focused on reducing inequalities in academic opportunities and career participation by promoting social inclusion interventions and training courses (Ryan 2001) and regulating the difficult transitional period from the end of studies to the first job (Caroleo et al. 2017; Stanwick et al. 2017).

However, the progressive impact and persistence of NEET status suggests a major focus on conditions among NEETs beyond the above mentioned transition periods, particularly those with deteriorating life conditions (e.g., depression, long-term inactivity, low family income), the trajectories of which began at a young age and increased with the duration of inactivity itself (Basta et al. 2019). This deterioration reflects the fact that with increasing age, self-efficacy and the intensity of the job search tend to decrease with the lowering of expectations among people who have been in difficulty for some time (Almeida and Simões 2020). People who have been NEET for long periods also doubt that they will be hired due to their long unemployment (e.g., Maguire et al. 2013), and these difficulties often increase due to their increased family responsibilities (relative to younger people), influencing their income conditions and the well-being of their families until the problems become a social malaise (Andersson et al. 2018). Older NEETs also face a lower expected labor income due to delayed entry into the labor market, which contributes to the persistence of NEET status (Tanaka 2020).

## *2.2 Gender disparities among NEETs: some experiences*

Disparities in NEET levels across genders can be found in almost all economic contexts since some causes of disconnection from both education and the labor market (e.g., interruptions to education and employment problems) can affect males and females differently (Tamesberger and Bacher 2014; Zuccotti and O'Reilly 2019). The NEET gender gap is mainly explained by gender roles, which essentially attribute greater family responsibilities to women without the necessary help from family or society (Carcillo et al. 2015; OECD 2016). Some similar features characterize many countries and cultures. For example, Mauro and Mitra (2020), in a cross-country study, analyzed Eastern Europe and Central Asia after the crisis, and despite finding a reduction in the NEET gender gap, they found common characteristics among young NEET women, such as being married, less educated, older, and living

in rural areas. In this sense, the increase in the NEET rate with age, especially for women, is a well-documented phenomenon (e.g., Thomposon 2011 for England).

However, available studies on gender differences among NEETs suggest causes based on countries' socioeconomic characteristics. Zuccotti and O'Reilly (2019) show the relevance of family conditions for NEETs, finding that British and migrant backgrounds influence family characteristics and traditions, as well as the different job opportunities available, and even the lower risks for males are not generalizable (e.g., this does not hold for the Caribbean group). Gutman et al. (2014) find that young Britons have different responses by gender to increasing uncertainty in the labor market. Men of recent generations seem to be the most affected by uncertainty (work difficulties and low incomes). Better economic and employment conditions benefit women by pushing them to invest in education and careers (e.g., rather than parenthood). However, education may not be a remedy for the female gender. Rodriguez-Modroño (2019) observe that Spanish women with a tertiary education are at higher risk of becoming NEET than less educated women, while this does not happen for Spanish men, though women are more advantaged when they have been in education or training during the last year. Bynner and Parsons (2002) show that male and female NEETs not only differ in the causes of their inactivity but also in the consequences of this phenomenon in the UK. For young men, the consequences mainly include work problems; for young women, they affect family life, dissatisfaction and a reduced sense of control over their lives.

In other countries, the role of women is characterized by restrictions and obligations. For example, Erdoğan et al. (2017) explain the large gender differences between young Turkish NEETs through low female labor force participation (approximately 70% for men and 30% for women), the attribution of household chores and childcare to women, and a generally lower level of education (e.g., leaving school after marriage), mainly due to a patriarchal culture. For Italy, Contini et al. (2019) explain its large gender gap compared to other European countries and the particularly worrying conditions among older women (24-29 years), resulting from weaker education protections, family responsibilities, and to a great extent, high unemployment with a risk of long-term unemployment, which has a discouraging effect. Vancea and Utzet (2018) find that the risk of becoming NEET increases with age for Spanish women, who find it more difficult to re-enter the labor market (e.g., after childbirth) and face worse contractual

conditions, or because they have to spend more time meeting family responsibilities, which in turn worsens their personal prospects for work and earnings. These responsibilities provoke a clearly marked gender-based division of labor. Since being women and having children are among the main motives that explain the NEET condition, Tamesberger and Bacher (2014, on Austria) propose not to consider “*young mothers with care responsibilities who are not actively looking for a job*” (p. 1253) as NEET.

### 3. Method and data

The econometric model used to investigate the potential causes of distancing from the labor market and education among Italian NEETs has the following form:

$$NEET_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 UR_{i,t} + \beta_2 DROPOUT_{i,t} + \gamma_n \sum_{n=1}^N X_{ni,t} + \mu_i + \eta_t + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad [1]$$

In Equation [1], the four dependent variables ( $NEET_{i,t}$ ) are the NEET rates for the two age groups, 15-24 and 25-34 years (calculated relative to the respective population of young Italians), and in each group, males and females are considered separately (see Table 1 for variable definitions and sources and Table 2 for summary statistics). Our analysis covers 17 regions<sup>7</sup>,  $i$ , and the 9-year period 2010-2018,  $t$ .

The NEET rate is calculated as the proportion of young people neither in employment nor in education and training, representing young people who find themselves disengaged from both education and the labor market (from the Eurostat definition). Among our regressors, we separately consider two variables that are suspected to be endogenous due to reverse causality with the dependent variable, i.e., the unemployment rate ( $UR_{i,t}$ ) and the school dropout rate ( $DROPOUT_{i,t}$ ). The other variables, instead, are considered as exogenous. The unemployment rate (and for young people the youth unemployment rate, i.e.  $YUR$ ) is assumed to be a proxy for the (inverse) efficiency of the labor market. The unemployment rate helps explain NEET persistence since

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<sup>7</sup> We use age groups for the NEET phenomenon and the division by gender that differ from the usual NEET rate, which did not allow us to obtain data for all 20 Italian regions (the regions with missing data and not included in the analysis are Aosta Valley, Molise, and Trentino-Alto Adige; the population residing in these excluded regions is the 2.48% of the Italian population in 2018, based on ISTAT data).

remaining unemployed at a young age influences the likelihood of being unemployed in the future and of being detached from the labor market (Bradley et al. 2020). The dropout rate is a measure of early school leaving calculated through missed re-enrollment after middle school and a lack of continuation of other forms of training. Leaving school before obtaining a high educational qualification increases the risk of becoming and remaining NEET (see Giret et al. 2020, for France).

The existence of highly persistent variables and the endogeneity issues related to reverse causality between the dependent variable and the two potential endogenous variables in the first group of regressors can lead to biased estimation results. We address this potential distortion by implementing the SYS-GMM estimator developed by Blundell and Bond (1998), which, thanks to its flexibility and few required assumptions concerning the data generation process (Bontempi and Mammi 2015), is robust within a dynamic panel data framework. By adding the levels equation to the first-difference equation, the SYS-GMM increases the accuracy of the estimated parameters as it exploits the bulk of the variation in the data by adding additional and more informative moment conditions (Bobba and Coviello 2007; Castelló-Climent 2008).

Following the economics literature, we include the following set of control variables ( $X_{i,t}$ ). For each variable, we explain the different effects by gender, and therefore why they are suitable for analysis.

The adult population education level (see *TERTIARY* in Table 1) and average income (*GDP*) are proxies for family socioeconomic status, which capture the human capital of parents and their income, respectively, and which are factors observed to influence NEET status (e.g., Odoardi 2020 for Italy). Such measures of social class play a fundamental role in the transition periods of young people, and also affect work opportunities (Bynner and Parsons 2002). Adult people education, proxy of parents' human capital level, is supposed to condition their contribution to their children's school careers, since higher education is a frequent condition for parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). In addition, economic status acts as a support for cultural/educational background at the household level (e.g., Zellman and Waterman 1998). In the analysis by gender, these variables can have diverse effects because gender differences can be present in the expectations of parents about their children's education (Wood et al. 2007).

We include proxies of the wide range of family responsibilities (e.g., early marriage and childbirth, Serracant 2014) that can affect NEETs and that



prevent them from resuming their studies or make it difficult for them to find a job. We consider marriage (*AGE\_GROOM/AGE\_BRIDE*) and early parenthood (*CHILDBIRTH*) to be potentially influencing aspects of NEET status (e.g., Gutiérrez-García et al. 2017). Early childbirth is a recognized cause of inactivity (e.g., Mascherini et al. 2012), for which we consider the proxy of children born by very young mothers, and in general, parenthood affects women more than men (Contini et al. 2019). These factors are accounted for in our analysis since older NEETs are more often married and have children (Andersson et al. 2018; Basta et al. 2019).

We also consider the opportunities for young people to continue/resume studies and find a job using ICTs (information and communication technologies). In fact, ICTs are increasingly considered as tools for inclusion of youth at risk (Haché et al. 2010), having provided effective support for young people to improve their academic performance (e.g., Barbas et al. 2017) and job opportunities (e.g., Sadiq and Mohammed 2015), i.e. opportunities that we assume to be decreasing the risk of becoming NEET. About gender differences, the use of ICTs can represent a professional opportunity for women when the gender gaps in the use of ICTs, in related studies, and in work differences narrow (Kirkup 2002). To represent the access to these technologies, we use as a proxy the percentage of households with Internet connections (*INTERNET\_HH*) and, with the aim of adding a focus on the working context, the percentage of people who have used the web for active job searches (*ONLINE\_LABOR*).

Lastly, poverty is a cause of NEET status and is also related to the transmission of economic conditions between generations (Noh and Lee 2017). We consider the risk of poverty (*POVERTY*) since the possibility of the deterioration of the socioeconomic status of people at risk—particularly young people who are marginalized or unemployed during their transition into independent living—is a recognized problem (France 2008).

To control for time-specific factors that can affect NEET status, each regression includes a full set of time dummies  $\eta_t$  and regional time-invariant characteristics  $\mu_i$ . Finally,  $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  is the idiosyncratic error term.

**Table 1. Variable descriptions and sources**

	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Source</i>
1	NEET_M_1524, NEET_F_1524	People (aged 15-24) who are not in employment, education, or training (% by gender)	<i>Eurostat</i>
2	NEET_M_2534, NEET_F_2534	People (aged 25-34) who are not in employment, education, or training (% by gender)	<i>Eurostat</i>
3	YUR_M, YUR_F	Youth unemployment rate (YUR) for people aged 15-24 (% by gender)	<i>Eurostat</i>
4	UR_M, UR_F	Unemployment rate (UR) for people aged 25+ (% by gender)	<i>Eurostat</i>
5	DROPOUT_M, DROPOUT_F	Population aged 18-24 years with at most a middle school certificate, who have not completed a professional training course recognized by the Region and lasting more than 2 years and who do not attend school courses or participate in training activities (% by gender)	<i>ISTAT</i>
6	TERTIARY	Population aged 25-64 with a tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8 <sup>a</sup> ) (%)	<i>Eurostat</i>
7	GDP	Gross domestic product per capita in constant 2015 euros	<i>ISTAT</i>
8	INTERNET_HH	Households with home Internet access (%)	<i>ISTAT</i>
9	ONLINE_LABOR	People (aged 6+) who have looked for work or sent a job application using the Internet in the last 3 months (%)	<i>ISTAT</i>
11	AGE_GROOM; AGE_BRIDE	Average age at marriage (years, by gender)	<i>ISTAT</i>
12	CHILDBIRTH	Early childbirth, number of children per 10,000 young women: ratio of live births among women aged 10-16 and the resident population of women aged 10-16 (per 10,000 women)	<i>Our elaborations on Eurostat data</i>
10	POVERTY	At-risk-of-poverty rate (%)	<i>Eurostat</i>

<sup>a</sup> Tertiary education according to the *International Standard Classification of Education* classification: Short-cycle tertiary education, bachelor's or equivalent level, master's or equivalent level, doctorate or equivalent level.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Obs.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
NEET_M_1524	153	20.135	7.267	9.3	35.7
NEET_F_1524	153	19.337	5.601	11	32.3
NEET_M_2534	153	22.254	11.221	8.3	49.5
NEET_F_2534	153	37.357	12.003	22.9	61.5
YUR_M	153	34.815	11.912	14.1	62.5
YUR_F	153	39.676	12.535	15.6	70.1
UR_M	153	8.954	4.446	2.8	19.2
UR_F	153	11.599	4.882	5.2	23.9
DROPOUT_M	153	17.551	5.670	6.6	31.8
DROPOUT_F	153	12.038	4.078	4.5	22.3
TERTIARY	153	16.812	2.947	11.6	25.6
GDP	153	25915.53	6497.67	15844.48	38532.54
INTERNET_HH	153	62.186	8.924	44.1	79.6
ONLINE_LABOR	153	18.048	2.840	12.4	25.9
AGE_GROOM	153	37.022	1.963	33.1	40.9
AGE_BRIDE	153	32.896	1.689	29.4	36.3
CHILDBIRTH	153	2.862	2.201	0.2	12.5
POVERTY	153	20.041	10.213	7.8	44.6

Source: Authors' elaborations on ISTAT and Eurostat data.

The average values of the NEET rates in Table 2 highlight the widening of the NEET gender gap with age: the NEET rate for adult women is on average 15% higher than that for males, with maximum values of over 60%. In

contrast, the gender gap between URs is lower than that between YURs<sup>8</sup>. School dropout is a problem mostly related to men, whose diffusion in Italy piques concern in a “knowledge economy”, since the Italian dropout levels are among the highest in Europe and causing the lack of adequate education to be one of the main challenges for the national education system (OECD 2020).

#### 4. Results

According to the test elaborated by Pesaran (2020), the null hypothesis of cross-sectional independence in the data cannot be rejected at the 10% level. The tests in Table 3 are applied to both the fixed- and random-effects approaches used.

**Table 3. Results of Pesaran’s CD test**

	NEET_F_15- 24	NEET_M_15- 24	NEET_F_25- 34	NEET_M_25- 34
Random-effects	-1.857 (0.063)	-2.121 (0.034)	3.093 (0.002)	1.231 (0.218)
Fixed-effects	-1.896 (0.058)	-2.026 (0.043)	1.797 (0.072)	0.924 (0.355)
Hausman FE/RE	26166.81 (0.000)	27.39 (0.072)	13114.27 (0.000)	21.47 (0.018)

We show the results of our analyses concerning the four groups of NEETs taken into account (young and old NEETs by gender), followed by the tests of the model<sup>9</sup>, in Table 4.

<sup>8</sup> The value of the women’s indicator reflects the structural weakness of the labor force participation rate, which for women is 41% in Italy, while it reaches 51% in the EU and 56% in the US (based on 2020 World Bank data).

<sup>9</sup> From the test for serial autocorrelation, we can observe that while first-order autocorrelation is present (as expected), the null hypothesis of the absence of higher-order autocorrelation cannot be rejected at the 10% level in all the estimated SYS-GMM models. Furthermore, since the model is overidentified, the statistics from Hansen’s (1982) J-test should be reported in order to verify the validity of the instruments. However, the small number of units (N=17) makes this test unreliable: once we instrument both the lagged dependent variable and the two key variables that belong to the first group of regressors, the set of instruments becomes so wide that the statistics take on values equal to 1. Thus, we decided not to report the results of this test.

**Table 4. SYS-GMM results (2010-2018)**

Dependent variable	NEET_F_15	NEET_M_15	NEET_F_25	NEET_M_25
	-24	-24	-34	-34
	(SYS-GMM)	(SYS-GMM)	(SYS-GMM)	(SYS-GMM)
NEET <sub>i,t-1</sub>	0.3982*** (0.1518)	0.1636* (0.0986)	0.5386*** (0.1421)	0.4586*** (0.1039)
TERTIARY	-0.2609** (0.1124)	0.1504 (0.1415)	-0.2617* (0.1368)	-0.0597 (0.2205)
ln(GDP)	-0.9051 (2.1889)	-4.3885** (1.7768)	0.3745 (5.7521)	-2.5122 (2.7956)
ONLINE_LABOR	-0.0078 (0.0911)	0.0903 (0.1007)	0.0149 (0.0796)	0.2099* (0.1139)
INTERNET_HH	0.0312 (0.0471)	0.0542*** (0.0175)	0.0022 (0.0839)	-0.0614 (0.0558)
POVERTY	0.0745 (0.0863)	0.1831*** (0.0514)	0.1463 (0.1288)	0.1482*** (0.0521)
CHILDBIRTH	0.2291* (0.1217)	-0.0991 (0.0898)	0.0479 (0.1717)	0.0054 (0.1386)
AGE_BRIDE/GROO M	0.0141 (0.4222)	-0.4220* (0.2526)	-0.5079 (0.4995)	0.1635 (0.2111)
YUR/UR_F	0.1362* (0.0819)		0.6581* (0.3507)	
DROPOUT_F	-0.0358 (0.1476)		-0.1267 (0.1528)	
YUR/UR_M		0.1621** (0.0685)		0.9271*** (0.2212)
DROPOUT_M		0.2631*** (0.0808)		-0.1062 (0.1912)
Constant	15.9994 (18.8419)	54.9995*** (14.7542)	25.1614 (63.4776)	23.336 (25.2133)
N	17	17	17	17
N*T	153	153	153	153
Arellano-Bond (1)	0.006	0.000	0.000	0.011
Arellano-Bond (2)	0.181	0.356	0.963	0.363

Source: Authors' elaborations on ISTAT and Eurostat data.

Note: \*statistically significant at the 10% level; \*\*statistically significant at the 5% level; \*\*\* statistically significant at the 1% level. Standard errors clustered by regions are given in parentheses.

The main findings reveal that the potential determinants of NEET status are different when we distinguish NEETs by gender and by age. However, the results show the presence of a common effect between the four categories. In line with other socioeconomic studies (Bruno et al. 2014), the persistence of the NEET phenomenon over time characterizes a condition that feeds itself by progressively discouraging the affected groups, even though with different magnitudes. In all models, the coefficients on the lagged dependent variables ( $NEET_{i,t-1}$ ) are positive and statistically significant at the 1% level (except among younger men, for whom the effect is weaker), but the highest coefficient (0.539) is associated with women NEETs aged 25-34. The presence of higher coefficients for women could reflect the traditional habit of self-distancing from the labor market that is still present among Italian women (ISTAT 2019).

The variables considered to be endogenous and mainly connected to the NEET condition offer interesting food for thought. The problem of employability is evident. Two aspects arise. First, the URs show stronger effects than the YURs, confirming that the NEET condition among young adults is more linked to unemployment (Contini et al. 2019), also due to the age for which employment support is usually no longer obtained (Tamesberger and Bacher 2014). Second, while the YURs by gender are similar, URs unexpectedly show a worse condition for men, probably influenced by the numerous interventions for triggering female employment in recent years, with the aim of both reducing gender gaps and promoting economic growth (e.g., Severini et al. 2019). On the effect of school dropout, our results confirm the OECD (2016) findings on the discontinuation of studies as a widespread problem especially among young men.

The analysis of the family background (*TERTIARY* and  $\ln GDP$ ) offers results that are lower than expected. Adult population education plays a role in driving the NEET condition among women, as adult education provides a model and guidance, and contributes to establishing a more competitive environment in terms of human capital. In synthesis, our finding confirms the positive relationships among education, labor opportunities and labor performance for women in the Italian economy (e.g., Addabbo and Favaro 2011), which also influence the NEET gender gap. Conversely, our second proxy for family background—the measure of average income—reduces NEET risk for young men only. As observed by Bruno et al. (2014), the male NEET rate has the greater responsiveness to GDP variations. A greater income can provide support for young people's life conditions, reducing the risk of

becoming NEET by allowing greater opportunities and choices, such as the possibility of investing in better education (e.g., Quintano et al. 2018). The greater opportunities affect the continuation of studies, and as observed by Schnepf (2014), men tend to be more likely to abandon their studies before completion.

Regarding the effects of the use of ICTs, their role is limited, and the sign is unexpected. We notice a probable distortion in the use that young people make of new technologies so that instead of being useful for advanced studies as expected (consistent with the age range examined, see Valentín et al. 2013), the ICTs are useless or counterproductive.

The influence of known family commitments/roles strengthens the expected results. Younger women are pushed out of the job market and away from academic paths when they give birth early, while younger men are pushed away from NEET status as their age at marriage increases, i.e., when family formation is postponed. In this framework, women voluntarily leave the labor market after childbirth often due to the scarcity of public protection and aid<sup>10</sup> (Bratti et al. 2005). Our results show that these effects disappear among older NEETs.

The coefficients for *POVERTY* are positive and statistically significant for males in both age groups, confirming the stronger effect of poverty conditions on the male gender, from the deterioration of their social condition to difficulties finding work and criminal temptations (Kingston and Webster 2015). Considering the recessionary period analyzed, this suggests plausible effects of increased discouragement and the exacerbation of the NEET phenomenon.

## 5. Conclusions

We have investigated the different causes of the NEET phenomenon that could explain the large gender gap among adult NEETs beyond the traditional limitations of the labor market and social obligations.

Our results suggest to search among the few aspects that influence adult NEET women differently than other groups. These mainly include two factors: the first is what we could define as an economically inactivity status “trap”, possibly linked to socioeconomic characteristics; the second factor

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<sup>10</sup> Less-qualified women, or women with commitments related to maternity, tend to exclude themselves from the labor market due to the scarcity of supportive aid, especially in the poorest contexts (Andreotti et al. 2013).

concerns the enhancement of human capital in Italy, from which women would benefit most.

Regarding the first factor, we must make two clarifications arising from our results. (i) Although the effect of so-called family and/or social obligations is a well-known issue in Italy (Sunström 1999) that forces young women to exit from the labor market (Coles 2000), these obligations are not statistically relevant for women over 25 years of age. (ii) The presumed concern regarding female employability<sup>11</sup> is reduced. Anyhow, this issue has implications at a higher level, where the structural scarcity of job opportunities for Italian women (even those without children, see Del Boca 2002) add to the recessionary cycle that has already caused unemployment and a precarious labor market (Liotti 2020). The two features considered have in common the effect of pushing young people toward NEET status—and in our case they could affect young women—and becoming inactive at a young age increases the likelihood of remaining NEET (Ralston et al. 2021).

Regarding the second factor, women seem to be the only group that can take advantage of the enhancement of human capital. Such a result could be influenced by the fact that women are able to demonstrate better performance in many levels of education and training, and therefore they should be better performing in the knowledge economy (Walby 2010). This seems to be a decisive aspect on which policies to reduce the NEET gender gap could be based—i.e., political interventions to promote the spread of advanced education—if Italy were a “typical” advanced economy. Unfortunately, the fragile path of Italian development in terms of widespread innovation and education has contributed to shaping an economy that attributes relatively low importance to human capital and innovation (Nuvolari and Vasta 2015), suggesting that gender gaps (e.g., wage<sup>12</sup>, unemployment) that would be reduced as a result of the spread of advanced education (Mussida and Picchio 2014) are unlikely to be affected in the short term.

Our age- and gender-based analyses may have other interpretations which in turn condition policy implications. We try to suggest interventions in two different phases and to outline, through the comparison between groups, whom support interventions should be directed to. We propose possible solutions to prevent and to take action on the problem.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the female employment rate exceeded 50% only in 2019 (on ISTAT data).

<sup>12</sup> Wage gaps in Italy also depend on workers' specialization and field of study, social norms, availability of childcare services (e.g., Piazzalunga 2018).



Some differences between groups may suggest how counteracting the problem at the origin. In our findings, we observe that young males are the group least at risk of having a persistent NEET status (being most endangered by negative economic trends). In contrast, women suffer from difficulties in exiting the NEET status; therefore, policymakers' objective should be to help young people avoid this negative condition as a first step to reduce the gap. However, a change in social roles (e.g., family commitments/roles related to early childbirth) does not seem easily achievable, as it is well rooted in Italian culture (Cutillo and Centra 2017). The classification of the subjects most involved in such roles could be a first step toward rethinking the female position in terms of their family responsibilities (Donà 2012). This suggests a first step for intervention to prevent the problem: scholastic and extracurricular supports for women, mainly linked to the opportunity to choose a professional career, must be targeted to women in economic difficulty who are less educated (and have fewer digital skills) and who have children. Such interventions could be a stimulus to reverse the low propensity to work related to Italian women, being the employment rate for women (53.8%) among the lowest in the EU28 (average of 68.2%, Eurostat 2019 data), trying to trigger positive effects on income levels and reducing inequality (Nieuwenhuis et al. 2020).

To correct the problem, we must consider that the situation among older female NEETs differs from that among males. The latter suffer from weaknesses during their youth, and unemployment and a lack of training/experience make it more difficult to exit the NEET condition over time (as observed by Rodriguez-Modroño 2019). Women in the older group are less afflicted by unemployment than older men, but are much more afflicted than young people. Our findings suggest that only a resolute intervention in the labor market could help all groups. However, the most plausible intervention clashes with the poor post-crisis recovery in Italy, also conditioned by the EU plans (Stability and Growth Pact) for fiscal consolidation (Karagounis et al. 2015) and for austerity measures that have curbed desirable post-crisis aid to the economy. The goal could be to increase efficiency a priori: policy actions could be undertaken by improving the competitiveness of young people and the integration between the labor market and the school system (Pastore 2015), consisting, e.g., in an assisted transition

toward job searches<sup>13</sup>, consultants and professional training courses. To correct the problem, employment aid (compare with Tamesberger and Bacher 2014 on Austria) should therefore continue beyond the young age, and focus on the less competitive groups of people depicted: those who are beyond the usual age of education, those who have already been NEET, and those who risk further distancing themselves from the labor market (and not just those who have finished compulsory school).

Finally, we must consider that the discussed interventions targeted to adult NEETs would reinforce a positive trend toward reducing gender gaps that is already underway (Addabbo et al. 2015) and could possibly mitigate the disruptions due to the Great Recession.

Limits to this research concern the possibility of studying the diverse composition of NEETs, mainly those who are inactive and unemployed (OECD 2016) and the frequency and persistence of NEET status over time (see Kleif 2020); nevertheless, data availability limits this possibility. Of course, other limitations could be overcome through the integration of microdata with the direct motivations of the young people involved, but in this case, again, the availability of surveys that jointly offer this information restricts this option.

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<sup>13</sup> Women may have more difficulty during the school-to-work transition phase (see Acosta-Ballesteros et al. 2017, for Spain).

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