REPORT | RACE AND ETHNICITY | WORK

Ethnicity, poverty, and in-work inequalities in the UK

This literature review looks at the main patterns, themes and key issues relating to research on ethnicity and experiences in work in the UK.

Published on: 6 February 2026
Written by: Maria Hudson, Pasi Ahonen and Jity Bajaj

Reading time: 95 minutes

Executive summary

Although there have been encouraging signs of progress, achieving true workplace equity for ethnic minority communities remains a persistent challenge. There is stark evidence of persistent disparities in the UK labour market, with certain ethnic communities consistently experiencing worse outcomes. Also clear is that in the context of deepening poverty in the UK, paid work offers less protection to adults and children in Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani households, who currently experience unacceptably high poverty rates (JRF, 2025).

Drawing on a range of studies, this review examines how labour market structures and institutions play a role in the disproportionate poverty levels experienced by Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities. With a particular focus on in-work inequalities, it discusses job quality, barriers to better paid work and the role of visa status. The review presents a complex picture of labour market-related factors that contribute to poverty risk and work outcomes. It also explores labour market-related levers for fostering more equitable experiences of work and improving livelihoods.

The contours of in-work inequalities for Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani ethnic groups

Low pay and poor job quality

- Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black workers are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage work. These groups are at higher risk of not earning enough to live, and this experience is gendered as well as racialised.
- Workers from ethnic groups (including Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black African) report lower average job control (that is, influence over various aspects of their job, such as the pace, or perceived influence over task difficulty or performance standards) compared to their White counterparts.
- First-generation migrants often face disadvantages in the labour market due to language barriers, limited networks and foreign qualifications that may not be fully recognised. In contrast, UK-born ethnic minorities, typically second or third generation, tend to experience fewer obstacles, benefiting from better language skills, cultural integration and British education and qualifications.

Precarious forms of work

- Ethnic minority groups are disproportionately represented in insecure jobs, with Black/African/Caribbean workers and those from Pakistani and other Asian backgrounds more likely to be on severely insecure zero-hours contracts compared with White workers.

Quality of part-time jobs

- Bangladeshi, Black and Pakistani over-representation in part-time work is contributing to their hours-underemployment, low pay and heightened poverty risk.

Self-employment

- Pakistani men continue to have the highest self-employment rate in the UK in a context in which ethnic minorities in self-employment earn less than their White counterparts.
- While the evidence does not suggest that self-employment is a forced choice, research does find that members of ethnic minorities with high levels of education seek employment rather than self-employment, more so than the White British majority.

Gig work

- Almost a quarter of ethnic minorities working in the gig economy (24%) say this is their main source of income, compared to those with a White ethnic background (19%).
- There is a lack of data detailing the incidence of gig work for ethnic groups in the UK, including Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities, as well as its relationship to sustainable livelihoods.

Labour market barriers to moving into better jobs

Skills and qualifications

- Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils showed strong progress in school attainment 2019–24, while Black African pupils have also improved during this period. They now outperform their White British peers.
- Although ethnic minority young people have achieved significant educational progress that should, in theory, reduce poverty, they are more likely to experience a lack of economic return for education qualifications and improvement of skills. The lowest financial returns to education are observed among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African Muslim women.
- A distinctive form of underemployment is the lack of recognition of educational qualifications, skills and training obtained outside the UK. This is a perennial issue that continues to negatively impact the labour market opportunities and life chances of first-generation migrants.

Hiring and recruitment

- The level of ethnic discrimination has not significantly decreased in the UK labour market in the last 40 years.
- Discrimination and bias in hiring and recruitment, whether overt or unconscious, significantly limits access to stable, well-paid jobs for Bangladeshi, Black African, Pakistani and other minority candidates.

Workplace cultures and social networks

- Workplace cultures appear to have a significant role to play in creating persistent barriers to progress and development for the UK's ethnic minority communities. This is manifest in informal workplace cultures imbuing access to promotion.
- Many ethnic minorities appear to often lack access to influential social networks, which are crucial for gaining the information, mentorship and support necessary for career development.

Blatant and banal racism

- Despite decades of efforts to address discriminatory treatment, it has been estimated that two-thirds of Black and minority ethnic individuals report experiencing workplace racial harassment or bullying.

Intersectionality

- The experiences of ethnic minority women in the British labour market are profoundly shaped by the complex interplay of various social identities, including gender, ethnicity and religion, creating unique and often intensified forms of inequality.
- There is a broader research gap around other forms of intersectional identities (for example, disability, mental health, age, class), reflecting an ongoing need to move beyond simple ethnic categorisations.

- A genuinely effective approach to intersectionality must acknowledge and actively engage with the complex, dynamic interplay of identities and their compounding effects on experiences of inequality.

Visa status and in-work inequalities

Immigration controls and work inequalities

- Immigration controls and pathways to settlement can cause financial strain for some migrants, particularly when long periods are spent with no recourse to public funds, a visa condition which restricts access to most state benefits and housing assistance. Increasing the number of people subjected to the 10-year route is likely to exacerbate this.

Evidence of migrant exploitation at work

- Migrants with visas tied to low-paid sectors face particularly poor labour market outcomes and increased precarity.
- Entering the UK via a formal skilled worker route does not insulate migrants from labour market exploitation, with official data understating the extent of this problem.
- There is mounting evidence that the sponsorship model (which ties migrants' right to work in the UK to their employer) heightens the risk of exploitation, leaving workers vulnerable to coercive practices including debt bondage, excessive working hours and poor conditions.

International students and work

- International students coming to the UK on a student visa appear vulnerable to labour market exploitation due to their age, limited experience and lack of local support. Length of time in the UK helps to ease that vulnerability through improved language skills and local knowledge.

Asylum seekers, refugees and work inequalities

- Having to wait a long time on extremely low income with no right to work traps asylum seekers in extreme hardship and can lead some into undocumented work as they try to avoid destitution.
- On being granted refugee status, people ostensibly have unrestricted access to employment. However, many encounter barriers to paid work and are often underemployed, taking jobs below their qualification status.

Addressing ethnic/racialised in-work inequalities through public policy

- Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities have the highest coverage by the National Living Wage, indicative of a positive impact.
- To avoid tick-box approaches to Mandatory Ethnicity Pay Gap reporting, employers should be required to explain disparities, develop action plans and monitor their effectiveness.
- Employment Rights Bill measures to raise the minimum standards for work hold the promise of helping to address in-work poverty, not least through plans to enhance income security and reduce the use of exploitative

precarious contracts in which Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities are over-represented.

- More research is needed around combined discrimination, helping to recognise discriminatory intersectional experiences. Support is needed to raise awareness and provide guidance on avoiding discrimination cases as well as dispute resolution.
- The provision of adequate resources to enforce employment rights is essential to make those rights effective.

Conclusion

Systemic and organisational biases and discrimination within the UK job market are increasing the likelihood of poverty among Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani populations. Significant workplace inequalities exist, revealing differences across various indicators and that the experiences of these communities are under-researched across a range of factors. While research needs to continue to engage with the persistence of structural racism, the evidence base will be enriched through deploying a more intersectional lens.

Multiple policy interventions are required to help foster more equitable labour market outcomes, acknowledging the heterogeneity of experiences within and between different ethnic minority groups. A strong emphasis on enforcement needs to be part of those interventions to ensure their impact makes a tangible difference to the work experiences, livelihoods and life chances of the most marginalised ethnic minority communities.

1. Introduction

The composition of the UK labour market has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, with a growth in the share of the working-age population identifying as ethnic minority (ONS, 2023a). Although there have been encouraging signs of progress, achieving true workplace equity for ethnic minority communities remains a persistent challenge (APPG, 2012; McGregor-Smith, 2017; Li, 2020).

It is evident that disparities persist in the UK labour market, with some ethnic communities consistently experiencing more unfavourable outcomes than others. Poverty rates among working-age adults vary significantly by ethnicity, with over 40% of Bangladeshi and 35% of Pakistani workers affected, compared to 11% of White workers (JRF, 2025).

There are several drivers of this higher risk of in-work poverty. Partial employment within households is strongly linked to higher levels of in-work poverty – such as when not all adults are engaged in paid work because of caring for family and the home (JRF, 2025). Additionally, where people are in work but are concentrated in low-paid occupations or sectors, work part-time or for a lower average number of hours, or are self-employed, their risk of in-work poverty is higher (JRF, 2025).

Experiences of in-work poverty also vary depending on factors such as whether individuals are UK-born or foreign-born, whether they belong to the first or subsequent generations, and their geographic location. Other contributing factors to higher poverty risk for ethnic minority communities include larger family sizes and

housing tenure (JRF, 2025; Bucelli and Karagiannaki, 2025; Manzi and Serpa, 2025).

While the dynamics at play are nuanced, the evidence is clear that, in the context of deepening poverty in the UK, paid work offers less protection to people in Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani households (Matejic et al., 2024). Drawing on a range of studies, this review examines how labour market structures and institutions play a role in the disproportionate poverty levels experienced by Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities.

With a particular focus on in-work inequalities, it discusses job quality, barriers to better paid work and the role of visa status. The review presents a complex picture of labour market-related factors that contribute to poverty outcomes. Finally, there is an appraisal of the policy landscape focused on labour market-related levers for addressing poverty.

In reviewing the evidence base, this report includes studies which use acronyms/groupings that may now be considered outdated (for example, BME, BAME). Reference to specific ethnic groups is made when these are available.

2. The contours of in-work inequalities for Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani ethnic groups

Ethnicity and job quality

Low pay and poor job quality

Contemporary discussion of job quality has emphasised that it has pay and non-pay features. For example, the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices engaged with the rise of gig economy, platform-based jobs. It emphasised good work as having several non- pay dimensions, including security, progression and voice as well as fair pay (Taylor et al., 2017). Clark and Ochmann (2022) concentrate on the importance of both sufficient income and security/precarity of employment as a key feature of the UK labour market. In their analysis of ethnicity and employment quality for men in the UK, they define bad jobs as having 4 characteristics:

- low pay
- involuntary part-time work (the inability to work enough hours)
- being temporary (lacking the security of permanent jobs)
- solo self-employment (undertaken by the relatively low-skilled workers).

They code a worker as being in a good job 'if they are employed but not in any of these four categories' (Clark and Ochmann, 2022: 7). Modelling the probability of being unemployed alongside good and bad jobs, they find that although unemployment rates for some ethnic minority groups have declined, their share of 'bad' jobs has increased (Clark and Ochmann, 2022). Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black African men experience the poorest employment quality, with bad jobs replacing no job outcomes.

Their research further reveals that second-generation, UK-born ethnic minority men have improved access to good jobs relative to their foreign-born counterparts, especially within Bangladeshi and Black African communities (Clark and Ochmann, 2022). This advantage becomes more pronounced during economic downturns, as UK-born individuals are more successful in obtaining quality jobs.

While there appears to be some generational improvement, using the Clark and Ochmann measure of job quality, it remains the case that ethnic minority groups have higher average rates of low-wage employment than the majority White population, with Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black individuals disproportionately concentrated in low-wage work (McKnight, 2022; Richardson and Reddyhoff, 2022).

As will be discussed later in this review, the UK labour market now has several 'wage floors', one of which is the Real Living Wage (RLW). The RLW is a voluntary hourly pay rate that reflects the actual cost of living, independently calculated based on a basket of household goods and services (Hirsch, 2017). Analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings calculated that 33% of

Bangladeshi, 29% of Pakistani and 25% of Black workers earn below the RLW, compared to 20% of White British workers (Richardson and Reddyhoff, 2022).

Around a third of female workers from Pakistani (32%) and Bangladeshi (31%) groups were earning below the RLW; and of all the ethnic groups analysed, only Bangladeshi women earned more than men (Richardson and Reddyhoff, 2022), the reasons for which are unclear, given other findings around the disadvantage of Bangladeshi women. The main point is that these ethnic groups are at a higher risk of not earning enough to live rather than just survive, and this experience is gendered as well as racialised.

There is further evidence reinforcing this picture of ethnic pay disparities. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) analysis of the Annual Population Survey from 2012–22 has reported that in the UK in 2022, Black, African, Caribbean or Black British employees had a lower median gross hourly pay (£13.53) compared to White employees (£14.35). There was a persistent earnings gap over the 10-year period analysed.

Country of birth further influenced pay disparities: in 2022, UK-born Black, African, Caribbean or Black British employees earned more (£15.18) than their non-UK-born counterparts (£12.95), although both groups earned less than UK-born White employees (£14.26) (ONS, 2023b). Low sample sizes mean that a similar country of birth data comparison cannot be presented for Bangladeshi and Pakistani employees. However, available data on England and Wales showed that Bangladeshi and Pakistani employees earned less compared with White British employees (ONS,

2023b).

While pay and earnings disparities are pertinent markers of job quality, non-pecuniary benefits are important too. Recently some innovative work has been undertaken to provide a fuller picture of earnings disparities. Clark and colleagues (2021) develop a 'full earnings' metric that combines the monetary wages of UK workers with their subjective well-being proxied by their life satisfaction. This approach draws on quantitative data from the Annual Population Survey and Understanding Society. The analysis reveals hidden disparities in low-paid jobs. They find that ethnic minorities, young people, and women have significantly lower full earnings.

Ethnic disparities are especially pronounced for Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black workers, who face compounding disadvantages in both pay and work conditions. The findings from this study also indicate regional variation with full earnings inequality, notably severe in London and the South of England, suggesting regional discrepancies in job quality (Clark et al., 2021).

Job control is a key aspect of job conditions and quality, which is also linked to well-being and health (see, for example, Wilson et al., 2024). Drawing on 2 large-scale representative datasets in the United Kingdom, covering 3 decades across 1992–2022 (the Understanding Society Survey and the Skills and Employment Survey), Williams and colleagues (2024) undertook the first large-scale analysis of ethnicity and job control. The 2 datasets explore job control through distinct but comparable question frameworks.

Understanding Society (2010–22) measures individuals' influence over various aspects of their current job, including task selection, sequencing, working methods and pace. In contrast, the Skills and Employment Survey (SES) (1992–2017) focuses on perceived influence over task difficulty, nature of tasks, working methods, and performance standards. The researchers found that workers from Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Black African and 'other ethnicity' groups reported lower average job control compared to their White British counterparts, a statistically significant result.

The findings show that Bangladeshi workers are disproportionately represented in routine and manual occupations, while Black African and Caribbean individuals are over-represented in healthcare and public sector roles. The researchers find that occupational patterns contribute to differences in job control but do not fully explain the observed disparities.

The disparities in job control are found to be bigger for foreign-born workers (Williams et al., 2024). The authors note that first-generation migrants often face disadvantages in the labour market due to language barriers, limited networks and foreign qualifications that may not be fully recognised. In contrast, UK-born ethnic minorities, typically second or third generation, tend to experience fewer obstacles, benefiting from better language skills, cultural assimilation and locally recognised qualifications.

Even after accounting for demographic and workplace variables, ethnic disparities in job control persist, suggesting deeper underlying causes (Williams et al., 2024). Self-

selection into lower-autonomy roles is conveyed as one possible explanation. Some ethnic minority individuals may opt for jobs with less autonomy due to perceived barriers, limited opportunities or cultural expectations. However, this could reflect constrained choices rather than genuine preferences. In this vein, differential treatment by employers is an alternative explanation. Ethnic minorities may be systematically offered or steered toward roles with less autonomy. This points to structural inequalities in hiring, promotion and task allocation practices.

There is scope for future qualitative research to explore work orientations and experiences of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African workers. Job control might be a feature of this, supporting a deep dive into its situated context. Future enquiries might ask how much influence male and female workers from these ethnic groups have in their current job over tasks, how they work, at what pace and how hard they work. They may also study the consequences such work dimensions have for workers' mental and physical well-being and family life.

Precarious forms of work

Ethnic minority groups are more likely to be in insecure jobs that tend to be low paid (Ashiagbor, 2021; Richardson and Reddyhoff, 2022; TUC, 2022; Richardson, 2023; Matejic et al., 2024). In other words, they are more likely to be in 'non-standard' precarious employment that has been part of a dramatic shift in the structure of the UK labour market (Giupponi and Machin, 2024). Precarious work, which forms an important part of debates on job quality, is also multidimensional. It has objective dimensions — the contours of contractual insecurity and instability — and subjective

dimensions that provide insights into worker perceptions and experiences of consequences, such as the experience of anxiety as an emotional response to employment uncertainty.

Non-standard, precarious roles typically lack a sustained expectation of future employment (Ashiagbor, 2021). In the UK labour market, this has been a feature of the growth of casual or zero-hours contracts that are intermittent in nature and lack a guaranteed minimum number of hours, with workers only paid for the hours worked. Precarious jobs are often mediated through third parties, for example, via agency or personal service work. They can also include solo self-employment (Ashiagbor, 2021) and are also associated with the gig economy, reflected in the rise of digital platforms such as Uber (private driver hire), Deliveroo (courier services) and Bubble (baby-sitting).

Despite quantitative ethnicity data constraints (see section 5), there is clear evidence of systemic inequalities in relation to precarious work. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) conducts annual estimates of the number of individuals in insecure employment. This classification includes:

- workers on zero-hours contracts
- agency, casual, and seasonal workers (excluding those on fixed-term contracts)
- low-paid self-employed individuals who lack employment rights and protections and often cannot afford the financial safeguards necessary during periods of unemployment.

Recent analysis (TUC, 2022) highlights stark disparities in exposure to insecure work, with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) workers facing significantly higher risks compared to White workers. Approximately 15.7% of BME men and 12.4% of BME women are likely to be in insecure employment compared with 11.1% of White men and 10.3% of White women. Among employees, excluding the self-employed, BME women emerge as the demographic most affected by job insecurity.

Providing some finer-grained detail with respect to zero-hours contracts, recent regression analysis of Labour Force Survey Microdata 2022–23 found that 7.3% of Black/African/Caribbean workers, 6.5% of Pakistani workers and 5% of workers from any other Asian background were on zero-hours contracts compared with 3.1% of White workers (Martin et al., 2024). It is important to remember that some zero-hours work is lucrative consultancy; what matters is control, hence the need to focus on exploitative contracts.

The researchers further disaggregated this data into zero-hours workers in severely insecure work (meaning that they are facing multiple forms of insecurity such as contractual insecurity, low wages, unpredictable pay and lack of rights and protections) and other zero-hours contract workers. They found that 5.3% of Black/African/Caribbean workers, 4.8% of Pakistani workers and 3.7% of workers from any other Asian background were on severely insecure zero-hours contracts, compared with 2.3% of White workers (Martin et al., 2024).

Data on the incidence of temporary employment amongst ethnic minority communities also indicates disparities. Recent analysis of the LFS and Annual Survey

of Hours (Office of National Statistics, 2023b) shows that Black workers had the highest incidence of temporary employment (12%). Next highest were Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers, who were combined due to the small sample size (10%). These were compared to White workers (5%) (table 1).

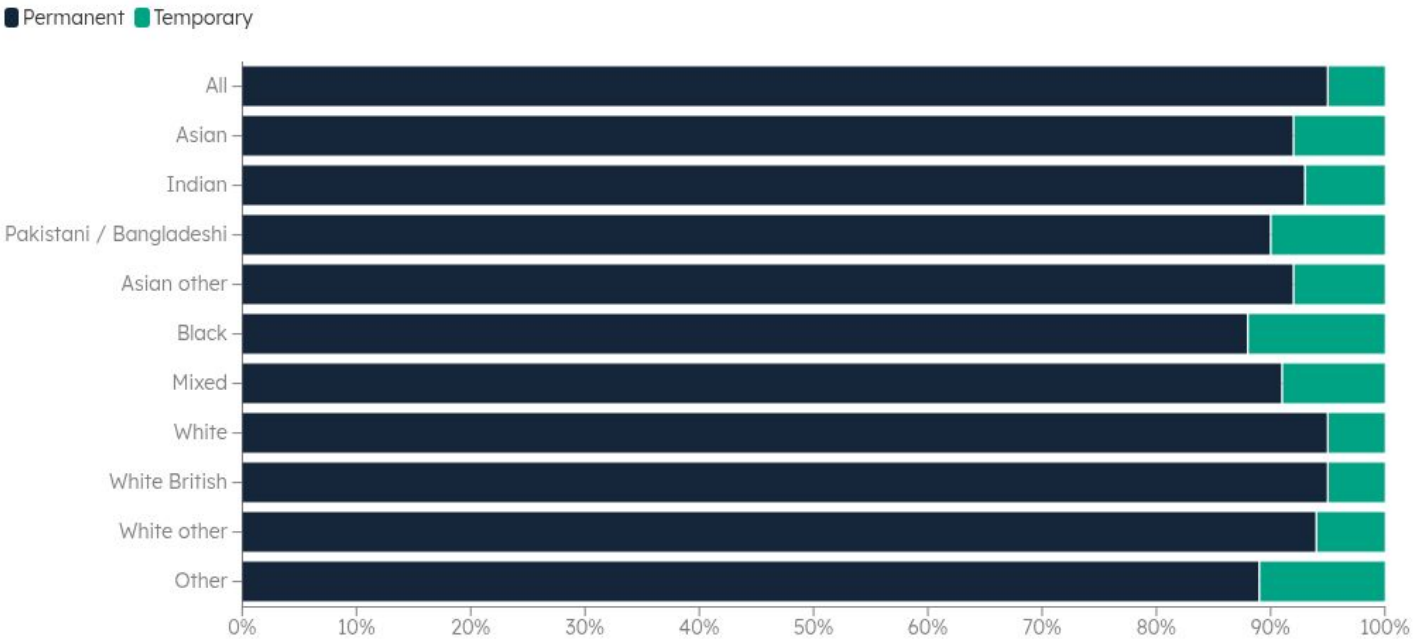
Earlier Resolution Foundation LFS analysis has highlighted the over-representation of ethnic minorities in agency work, noting that Black African and Caribbean individuals are 3 times more likely than the average worker to be employed through agencies (Judge and Tomlinson, 2016). Additionally, the study identified a pay penalty of 22 pence per hour associated with agency employment.

A slightly later report from the Resolution Foundation (Henehan and Rose, 2018) showed that although part-time employment tends to be primarily driven by gender (skewed to women), with ethnicity playing a secondary role, temporary employment reflects the opposite dynamic: ethnicity is the dominant factor, with gender as a secondary consideration.

In 2016–17, gender disparities in temporary work were minimal across White, Black and Indian groups, no more than 1 percentage point difference between men and women, though slightly larger within the Pakistani/Bangladeshi group (around 4 percentage points). In contrast, the difference between White and Black men and women was notably wider, with a gap of approximately 6 percentage points between White (95% to 96%) and Black (89% and 90%) men and women. This pattern has remained largely consistent over time.

A closer look at the forms of non-permanent employment in 2016–17 reveals that Black men and women were significantly less likely than other groups to be employed on fixed-term contracts, and more likely to be engaged in more precarious work arrangements. These included roles through employment agencies or casual/seasonal positions. Notably, the proportion of Black men and women working for an employment agency was more than twice that of White women and Indian men, underscoring their disproportionate exposure to insecure employment (Henehan and Rose, 2018).

Figure 1: Percentage of employed 16–64-year-olds who were in permanent and temporary employment by ethnicity in England, Scotland and Wales in 2022



Source: Annual Population Survey

In exploring what these disparities in the distribution of precarious work mean for the poverty risk of Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani workers, it is important to understand, as explored by Ashiagbor (2021), that the standard employment relationship (SER) is a legal form via which labour is regulated. The SER developed in tandem with vertically integrated firms (which extend their operations within their supply chains), industrial trade unions and the welfare state. Within the SER framework, workers benefit from employment protection legislation, partial job security derived from internal labour markets or vertical integration, collectively negotiated standards and entitlements provided by the Keynesian welfare model.

Paradoxically, the workers most in need of such social protections, particularly those afforded by labour law, are often excluded from their reach. This includes Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black workers whose over-representation in non-standard work arrangements reflects historic migrant labour segmentation that confines ethnic minority workers to a narrow range of insecure roles and limits their access to stable, higher-status positions (Ashiagbor, 2021).

For example, thanks in large part to a rapid growth in solo self-employment, an increasing share of the UK workforce now falls outside the scope of minimum wage protections. Such work has unique vulnerabilities, including the hiding of de facto dependent employment jobs that, it has been argued, should be protected (Boeri et al., 2020).

Not only are there significant gaps in legal protections for those in precarious employment but research also consistently finds that precarious work in the UK is

strongly associated with under-representation by trade unions and challenges for improved workplace organising (Heery and Abbot, 2000; Heery, 2009; Pollert and Charlwood, 2009).

As union membership and collective bargaining coverage have declined, especially in sectors with high levels of insecure work, this has fuelled the vulnerability of workers to employer exploitation, wage reductions and precarious contracts. The lack of union representation also removes a potential lever for rights enforcement, an issue that is salient given government plans to improve individual employment rights (see section 3).

Traditional union strategies in the UK have struggled to adapt to the presence of migrant and ethnic minority workers and their vulnerabilities (Connolly, Marino and Lucio, 2014). Efforts to improve organisation and representation have taken a range of forms, notably:

- developing targeted migrant worker recruitment campaigns
- actively promoting anti-racist policies and inclusive practices within union structures
- training and education for migrant workers, including language support and legal rights education
- Living Wage Campaigns advocating for fair pay and working conditions
- lobbying government for better protections and inclusive policies.

However, there is evidence of challenges in sustaining engagement, overcoming internal union resistance and navigating political constraints (Connolly et al., 2014).

Constraints on improving job quality can have stark consequences for social mobility and health. In terms of social mobility, precarious and insecure work has been an important part of contemporary discussion of the fact that work is not always a route out of poverty (Shildrick et al., 2012; McBride et al., 2018; Smith and McBride, 2023).

Research on poverty traps has tended to focus on commonalities in experience rather than the experiences of specific ethnic groups. This contributes to the experiences of specific communities remaining hidden in discussions of in-work poverty. For example, any distinctiveness of racialised pathways to insecure jobs remains opaque, as does the relationship between experiences of insecure jobs and experiences of hardship when struggling to make ends meet.

It is positive to see more research on the relationship between precarious work and mental health alongside a recognition that people with migrant status may face additional stressors due to issues of visa status, racial discrimination and disrupted professional identity (Irvine and Rose, 2024). Nevertheless, there remains a lack of depth of research on the experience of specific ethnic minority groups.

Qualitative research embedded in local communities and their organisations (including faith community structures) might help to provide greater insight into the health and well-being consequences of precarious work and coping strategies at both the individual, household and community levels. Commonalities and differences

between Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities need to be brought out, and a qualitative approach has the potential to achieve this. The label 'Black African' encompasses a wide range of countries of origin and community contexts, and this also merits finer-grained exploration.

Part-time work

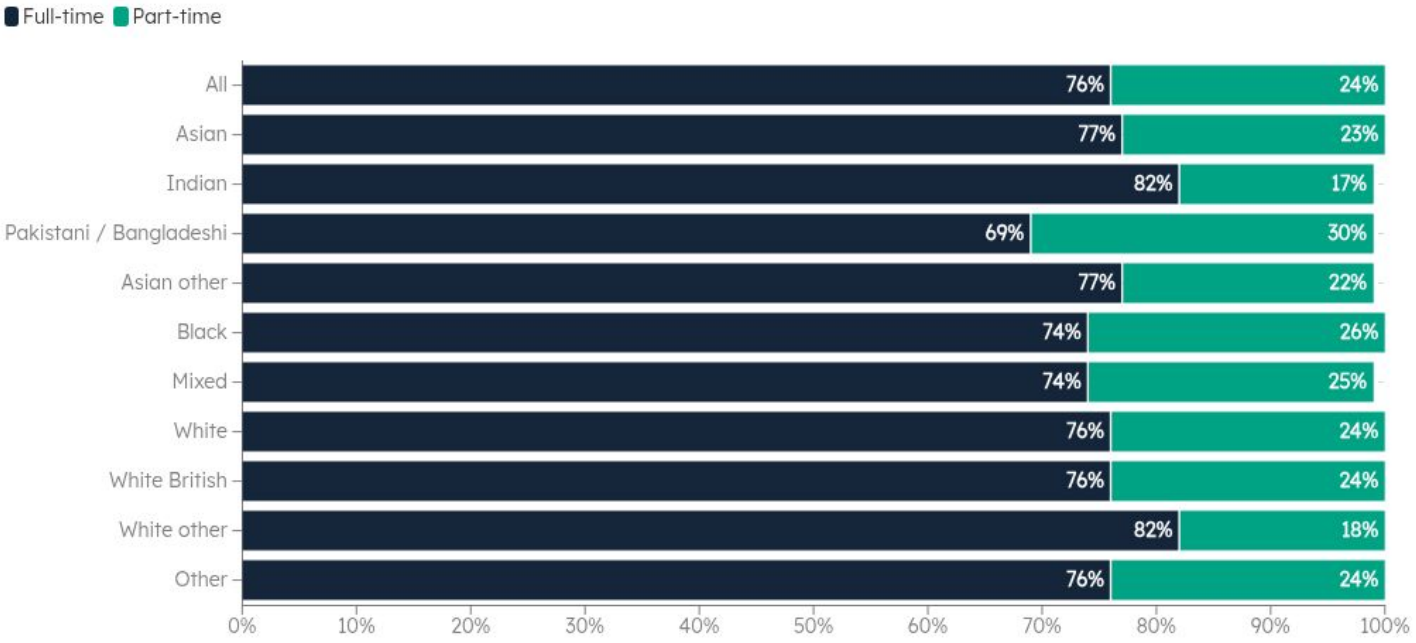
Workers earning low wages are disproportionately represented in part-time roles (Timewise, 2022). Analysis from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) shows that those in part-time work have a poverty rate 3 times that of full-time workers (22% compared with 8%) (JRF, 2025). Reinforcing this picture of earnings disadvantage, Mignon (2025) draws on the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings to show that 32.2% of part-time jobs are being paid below the RLW, compared to 9.7% of full-time jobs.

ONS analysis of the Annual Population Survey indicates that in 2022, Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers were over-represented in part-time employment, suggesting this is a factor in their poverty risk. As shown in table 2, part-time employment was being undertaken by 26% of Black workers and 30% of Pakistani/Bangladeshi workers, compared with 24% of White British workers (Office of National Statistics, 2023b).

Recent analysis of the LFS and Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings is more disaggregated. It finds part-time employment to be notably higher among Pakistani (29%) and Bangladeshi (36%) workers compared to White workers (25%) (Richardson and Reddyhoff, 2022). These analyses of part-time employment suggest that its extent amongst Bangladeshi, Black and Pakistani communities is contributing to

patterns of low pay and insufficient household income from employment.

Figure 2: Percentage of employed 16–64-year-olds who were in full- and part-time employment by ethnicity in England, Scotland and Wales in 2022



Source: Annual Population Survey, 2023
Note: Numbers don't sum to total due to rounding

The part-time working patterns for Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities are also important as there is strong evidence that people in part-time jobs are much less likely to move out of low pay (Nightingale, 2020), which increases poverty risk. Drawing on data from Understanding Society and the British Household Panel Survey, Nightingale (2020) examines how part-time employment influences progression out of low pay among male and female workers.

Findings indicate that part-time work significantly reduces the likelihood of escaping low pay, defined as earnings below two-thirds of the median hourly wage, compared to full-time employment. However, individuals transitioning from part-time to full-time roles progress at rates comparable to those consistently employed full-time, challenging assumptions that lower progression stems from reduced ability or motivation among part-time workers.

Even when possessing comparable levels of human capital and operating within similar labour market conditions, part-time workers remain more likely than full-time employees to receive low pay (Nightingale, 2029). The analysis underscores the need to improve the quality of part-time jobs in the UK labour market (Timewise, 2022), which can contribute to the erosion of pay gaps (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2017).

While the adverse impact of part-time work is more pronounced for men, women face a heightened risk of prolonged low pay, especially mothers, who are more likely to remain in part-time employment over time. Nightingale does not break down the analysis by ethnicity, and this is a research gap that it would be useful to address, particularly given the part-time working patterns amongst Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities.

There has been some useful reconsideration of the changing nature of in-work poverty that draws on evidence of workers undertaking multiple part-time jobs — described as multiple employment or mini-jobs (McBride and Smith, 2023). However, there is a lack of evidence as to the degree to which, how and with what potential

consequences, this is a feature of the working lives of Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani women and men.

ONS data from August 2025 indicates that there are approximately 3 and a half million workers in the UK experiencing underemployment (ONS, 2025a). While underemployment does not have an official definition, ONS data on underemployment is hours-focused, encompassing people who have jobs yet want to work more hours than they currently do. The data is not broken down by ethnicity. However, in the UK after 2010, rising employment rates were closely linked to an increase in involuntary part-time work, meaning that while more people were employed, many were working fewer hours than they wanted (Blanchflower, 2015).

It is reasonable to assume that the over-representation of Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities in part-time work must reflect a degree of 'hours underemployment' that feeds into insufficient household income from employment and heightened poverty risk. Further research could explore the relationship between underemployment and poverty for different ethnic groups.

Self-employment

The regulatory divide between 'employees', hired under a contract of service, and those with the status of independent contractors creates a systemic gap. As a result, an increasing segment of non-standard workers in precarious work, including those in solo self-employment, remains outside the remit of collective bargaining frameworks and statutory employment protections (Ashiagbor, 2021).

Part-time self-employed workers are more than twice as likely to be in poverty as employees (23% compared with 10%) (JRF, 2025). Individuals from minority ethnic groups who experience the highest levels of in-work poverty are not only disproportionately employed in lower-paid industries and roles but also more likely to work part-time, with fewer average hours, or to be self-employed, both of which are strongly associated with increased poverty risk (JRF, 2025). Research has called into question the accuracy of data on self-employment, particularly between 2002–03 and 2017–18 (Delestre and Jacobs-Strom, 2025).

Ethnic minority self-employment appears to exhibit strong sectoral intensity. Analysing microdata from the 2011 Census for England and Wales, Clark and colleagues identified significant concentrations of ethnic minority men born in Asia, particularly from Pakistan and Bangladesh, working in sectors such as transport, food and restaurants, and retail, though there are issues around small sample sizes (Clark et al., 2015).

Examining more disaggregated industrial categories, they find that over 40% of self-employed men born in Pakistan work in transportation and storage and around two-thirds of self-employed men born in Bangladesh either work in this sector or accommodation and food service activities. This sector-specific concentration appears to validate evidence that structural constraints shape self-employment pathways, often limiting economic advancement (Broughton, 2015).

A recent study provides analysis of the proportion of ethnic groups in self-employment, drawing on pooled data from the UK LFS from 1993–2014 (Brynin et al.,

2019). Combining data from multiple surveys helps to, at least in part, mitigate the problem of small sample sizes.

Focusing on the findings relating to ethnic groups at higher poverty risk, compared with 13.5% of White British men, a lower proportion of Bangladeshi men (10%) and Black African men (7%) are self-employed, and a higher proportion of Pakistani men (19.6%). This higher rate for Pakistani men is a recurring finding (Clark et al., 2015; Broughton, 2015; Clark and Drinkwater, 2010). Apart from Pakistani men, there is no clear higher incidence of ethnic minority men in self-employment.

Lower self-employment rates are found for Bangladeshi women (0.9%), Pakistani women (2.5%) compared to higher rates for White British women (5.1%) and Black African women (7%) (Brynin et al., 2019). Despite low self-employment rates, there appears to be growing visibility of Bangladeshi women in entrepreneurship, particularly in small-scale ventures.

However, the evidence suggests they continue to face significant obstacles, including restricted access to finance, entrenched social norms, and limited formal support structures (Rouse and Mirza, 2014). Both social attitudes and cultural norms (Bucelli and Karagiannaki, 2025) need to be considered in gendered analysis of the self-employment of ethnic minority women.

Some scholars suggest that self-employment can be a forced choice for some ethnic groups, reflecting limited employment opportunities. For example, that it emerges from complex interactions between labour market discrimination, structural inequalities, and individual agency (Ram and Jones, 2008). On the other hand, self-

employment can be seen as a form of liberation (Jones and Ram, 2013).

The analysis of Brynin and colleagues does not suggest that self-employment is a forced choice. At the same time, and in comparison to the White British majority, more ethnic minorities with higher levels of qualifications appear to be seeking employment rather than self-employment (Brynin et al., 2019).

Given evidence of education gaps between first- and second-generation ethnic minorities, it is perhaps unsurprising that non-British-born ethnic minorities are found to be more likely to be self-employed than the British-born minority population (Brynin et al., 2019). The evidence base suggests that there are nuances in first- and second-generation experiences of self-employment that need to be explored.

For example, with respect to Bangladeshi communities, there is some evidence that the second generation is more likely to engage in entrepreneurship driven by educational attainment, benefiting from greater social integration and improved (though not equitable) access to a wider range of sectors (Race Disparity Unit and Equality Hub, 2023).

Engaging with its quality, Brynin and colleagues test how self-employment of ethnic minorities differs from the majority group in terms of wages, hours worked and job satisfaction. They do so by drawing on the first 7 waves of Understanding Society (2009–17), the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS).

A main finding is that ethnic minorities typically work longer hours in self-employment compared to their White British counterparts, yet tend to earn less and experience

lower levels of job satisfaction in this type of work (Brynin et al., 2019). However, self-employment can help narrow income disparities between Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities and the White British majority, though this effect is not seen among other ethnic groups. Researchers should strive to further explore why these ethnic differences occur and any related policy implications.

Gig work

The development of the gig economy has created contemporary self-employment opportunities while generating new forms of precarity. Analysis of the LFS covering January–March 2022 estimates that the UK's gig economy comprises just under 463,600 individuals. Within a labour force exceeding 32.5 million, this represents only 1.4% of total employment.

Among gig economy workers, 52,898 are private hire drivers and 82,649 do food delivery. In contrast, over 250,000 people provide desk-based services like web development, translation and legal work via digital platforms, and 100,000 perform manual tasks such as cleaning, decorating, plumbing and dog walking (Cockett and Willmott, 2023).

Private hire drivers represent the most ethnically diverse segment in the UK gig economy, with 38% identifying as from ethnic minority backgrounds. Among food delivery drivers, 34% are from ethnic minorities, while the figure stands at 30% for couriers. In contrast, only 8% of those offering manual personal services belong to ethnic minority groups, and for desk-based services the figure is 14%.

Almost a quarter of ethnic minorities working in the gig economy (24%) say that this is their main source of income, compared to 19% with a White ethnic background. However, there is a surprising lack of data detailing the incidence of gig work for ethnic groups in the UK, including Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities, and its relationship to sustainable livelihoods.

Research from outside the UK provides some insights into why migrant workers might enter platform work (Van Doorn et al., 2023). Language barriers can limit job options, but multilingual apps, especially in food delivery, enable task completion with minimal verbal interaction. In addition, financial incentives like peak-time bonuses, self-employment tax benefits and instant pay access further enhance gig work attractiveness. Migrant workers often experience greater flexibility on gig platforms than in other available jobs.

This evidence implies that gig platforms can present relatively accessible entry points to employment with minimal prescribed barriers. However, there is again a dearth of ethnic-group-specific evidence. Transport for London estimates that 94% of private hire drivers in London are from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds, while London has an ethnic minority population of 40% (see Valance, 2021).

Long-standing concerns about precarious working conditions amongst these drivers, potential algorithmic discrimination, insufficient pay and lack of employment rights prompted a recent Early Day motion (UK Parliament, 2024). This motion acknowledges the findings of the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices, which emphasised the need for fair, flexible and secure work in the UK, engaging with the

rise of the gig economy. It proposed clearer employment classifications, a strengthening of employment protections and better enforcement of workers' rights.

A study by Bonhomme and Muldoon (2025) comparing platform worker experiences between the UK and Chile finds that while in Chile the primary driver for turning to platform work was pay, in the UK it was avoidance of overt racism in hiring and the workplace. Among the 30 participants from London, 12 were Black Africans from across Africa (for example Mali, Eritrea, South Africa) and 2 were Black Caribbeans.

There were qualified healthcare, education professionals and academics who had become frustrated with the structural barriers and discriminatory hiring practices and found platform work accessible, inclusive, flexible and effectively devoid of direct experiences of racism. Platform work, then, also appears to provide opportunities as well as a sense of independence and empowerment against a backdrop of experiences of racism and barriers in the broader labour market.

Despite its relevance, ethnicity is still relatively absent from critical debates on the gig economy and its societal consequences, including risk of poverty. This needs to be addressed through more research into the scope for gig work and self-employment to entrench rather than ameliorate the experience of in-work inequalities and poverty.

This research needs to explore the experiences of individuals and households (both women and men) in Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities. Further research might also usefully engage with inter-generational commonalities and differences in orientations to self-employment.

Labour market barriers to moving into better jobs

The persistent disadvantage experienced by members of some ethnic minorities in the UK labour market, despite relevant qualifications or experience, is deeply rooted in a complex interplay of historical and systemic factors (Batnitzky and McDowell, 2011; Li, 2020; Farashah et al., 2023; Foster and George, 2025). While there has been progress in some areas over the past 50 years, ethnic penalties have persisted, particularly in employment (Li, 2020).

Critical examination of the existing literature reveals several key historical and ongoing reasons contributing to this enduring disparity. These include systemic and institutional discrimination; devaluation and non-recognition of qualifications, skills and experience; lack of social capital and exclusion from informal networks; occupational segregation and 'typecasting' and, finally, pervasive prejudice and everyday racism.

The roots of differential treatment are deep. Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani workers have historically been recruited into particular industries (for example, textile mills, catering, and social and health care) and then allocated lower-paying and lower-status roles in those industries.

An oral history of post-war nursing by Batnitzky and McDowell (2011) illustrates the dynamics behind structural inequalities. Their interviews with 58 migrant women nurses of Caribbean and South Asian origins showed that NHS recruitment and training practices in post-war Britain were deliberately designed to assign foreign-

born nurses to a lower-status training programme (the State Enrolled Nurse route) rather than the higher-status State Registered Nurse route.

Such practices effectively constrained career progression, resulting in lower pay, limited opportunities for promotion, and stratification within the nursing workforce that proved to be enduring. Daily workplace practices reinforced these initial disadvantages. Nurses experienced racism from colleagues, managers and patients, which were manifest through both overt discriminatory behaviours and subtler forms of emotional or affective control.

Importantly, although some nurses demonstrated strategies of resistance or rationalisation, the majority internalised the imposed stereotypes and struggled to overcome their inferior positioning (Batnitzky and McDowell, 2011). This kind of initial channelling into less skilled or lower-paid roles established a legacy of disadvantage that then became a self-perpetuating structural condition.

Skills and qualifications

The role of skills and qualifications in lubricating ethnic minority pathways to better-paid jobs is both a good and bad news story. Overall, ethnic minority school achievement in the UK shows a positive trajectory, with the attainment gap at age 16 gradually narrowing between most ethnic minority groups and their White peers (Andrews et al., 2017; Education Policy Institute, 2025). Focusing on the picture for communities at most risk of poverty, the data shows they all outperform White British pupils.

Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils show strong progress between 2019 and 2024, especially among economically disadvantaged students who are eligible for free school meals, while Black African pupils have also improved during this period (Education Policy Institute, 2025).

Although ethnic minority young people have achieved significant educational progress that should, in theory, reduce poverty, they are more likely to experience a lack of economic return for education qualifications and improvement of skills (Rafferty, 2012; Brynin and Longhi, 2015; Morris, 2015; Henehan and Rose, 2018; Platt and Zuccotti, 2021; Dilnot et al., 2025). Higher qualifications alone do not equalise labour market outcomes with comparably educated White UK-born men and women (Rafferty, 2012).

Significant reward gaps have been identified, especially among Black and Pakistani/Bangladeshi men, even after accounting for compositional factors like age and part-time work (Henehan and Rose, 2018). Controlling for job type, education, region, and contract status, Black male graduates still earn 17% less than their White counterparts, amounting to a £3.90 hourly gap or over £7,000 annually in full-time roles (Henehan and Rose, 2018).

Similarly, Shaw and colleagues find that although Pakistani and Bangladeshi students have made notable progress in educational achievement, these gains have not been reflected in labour market success, particularly for women. The study reported that the lowest financial returns to education were observed among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African Muslim women.

It is also pertinent to return to the theme of underemployment, which can be understood not only in relation to insufficient working hours, but also as a wider mismatch between workers' potential and the job they do (for example, see Heyes, 2016). This 'mismatch underemployment' is arguably reflected in ethnic minority graduate labour market outcomes. It embodies individuals working in roles that demand less education, expertise or experience than they possess and can involve employment outside a person's field of study.

It can also arise when workers hold the necessary qualifications for their role, but the job structure prevents them from fully applying their skills or limits their opportunities for creativity and professional growth. The degree to which ethnic minority groups experience this wider 'mismatch underemployment' is under-researched.

Moreover, there is evidence of links between underemployment and the social and psychological challenges, such as a sense of dissatisfaction with the use of abilities and a feeling of purposelessness, typically linked to unemployment (Beck et al., 2024; Heyes, 2016). Also lacking in the evidence base is an exploration of the extent to which, and how, ethnic minority communities experience the social and psychological challenges associated with underemployment.

A distinctive dimension of underemployment is the lack of recognition for educational qualifications, skills, and training obtained outside the UK (Dale, 2002; Platt, 2007; Netto et al., 2015; Tinarwo, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Farashah et al., 2023; Foster and George, 2025). Employers and institutions are often unfamiliar with foreign educational systems, leading to a systemic misunderstanding or outright

unwillingness to recognise these credentials (see Farashah et al., 2023).

This means that highly qualified individuals, such as doctors or nurses with degrees from their countries of origin, are frequently forced to start at the lowest grades or take menial jobs, effectively 'deskilling' them. For example, Tinarwo's (2017) study reveals that Zimbabwean social workers explicitly called to fill labour shortages were told that their experience was 'an unknown quantity' and that they had to start at the lowest grade, with only their lower qualifications being recognised, despite them holding higher degrees.

Corroborating this evidence, the UK's Social Mobility Commission has undertaken research to address the lack of insight into how widespread downward mobility is, what it entails and what its impacts are. This involved a comprehensive analysis of existing quantitative datasets (the LFS, National Child Development Study, British Cohort Study and Understanding Society survey) alongside original qualitative interviews with UK individuals who have experienced downward mobility.

Amongst its findings was that for migrant workers from backgrounds such as Black African, Bangladeshi and Other Asian groups, education does not offer the same shield against downward mobility as it does for those born in Britain. And even when individuals earn top degrees, like a master's from a respected UK university, their ethnic background often acts as a silent barrier, preventing those achievements from opening doors in the job market (Social Mobility Commission, 2020).

Recent research by Foster and George (2025) adds to this picture of differing labour market experiences of those who are UK-born and non-UK-born. Using semi-

structured interviews with 32 Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minority immigrants and their descendants in the UK alongside secondary data sources, the study finds generational differences.

First-generation migrants found themselves disproportionately in low-skilled jobs due to unrecognised foreign qualifications, limited UK work experience, perceived language proficiency and accent bias, and other overt and covert forms of discrimination and racism. The second generation enjoyed higher educational attainment, or at least full recognition of it, but still faced barriers, such as slower progression in their careers as well as the effects of structural and everyday racism.

Ethnic minority graduates, the study finds, are less likely to find employment and significantly more likely to find jobs for which they are over-qualified (see also McGregor-Smith, 2017). In the Foster and George study (2025), the respondents identified racism (65% of participants cited), limited social networks (45%) and lack of career progression opportunities (50%) as the key drivers of disadvantage.

Hiring and recruitment

Earlier research has identified difficulties in entering the labour force and obtaining better jobs as one of the likely root causes for ethnic penalties. The cumulative effect of discrimination in hiring can be clearly seen in workforce statistics. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black groups experience the highest unemployment rates of all ethnicities (Bucelli and Karagiannaki, 2025), as well as being disproportionately concentrated in insecure work.

Observing ethnic discrimination in hiring and recruitment is pertinent to this experience, but very difficult, at least in large-scale, quantitative studies. Evidencing discrimination-in-action is methodologically challenging (Bertrand and Duflo, 2017). Researchers have come to rely increasingly on field experimental research to collect evidence of discrimination in hiring processes (Baert, 2018).

Meta-analyses of field experiments (see, for example, Heath and Di Stasio, 2019; Quillian and Lee, 2023) corroborate what the statistics already suggest: that despite various efforts and changes over time, the level of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity has not significantly decreased in the UK labour market in the last 40 years. Zwysen and colleagues (2021) specifically link discrimination estimates from experiments and ethnic penalty estimates from the LFS and find a positive correlation, corroborating the argument that discrimination at the hiring stage is one major contributor to ethnic penalties.

According to field experiments, the most affected groups have consistently been Black Caribbeans and Black Africans, as well as members of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities (Heath and Di Stasio, 2019). Discrimination can be found ‘at every stage of the recruitment process, when assessing applications, during interviews, at recruitment agencies and also in the workplace itself’ (APPG, 2012, p. 4).

Stereotypes and racialised assumptions lead employers to filter out minority applicants early (for example, discarding CVs with ‘foreign-sounding’ names or non-UK experiences) and to scrutinise them more harshly in interviews (Wood et al., 2009;

Heath and Di Stasio, 2019). Ethnic minority applicants receive significantly fewer callbacks than White applicants with exactly the same credentials and experience (Larsen and Di Stasio, 2021).

Despite formal policies advocating for fairness, ethnic minority individuals frequently encounter recruitment and promotion processes that are anything but transparent (Wood and Wybron, 2015; McGregor-Smith, 2017). Research indicates that formal procedures are often undermined by informal decision-making, where insider information or the 'who you know' factor plays a critical role (Bradley et al., 2007; Hudson et al., 2013; Wood and Wybron, 2015).

Interview panels may lack diversity, and selection criteria can, often inadvertently, perpetuate existing preferences, historical tendencies and what is habitually considered to be appropriate or suitable. This results in minority ethnic employees being less likely to be given promotions (Bradley et al.) or ethnic minority staff members themselves 'choosing' career trajectories that are more manageable, as the case study of Nigerian nurses and doctors by Edeh, Kokot and Riley (2024) reveals. Workplace culture therefore not only erects hindrances and barriers but also channels ethnic minorities onto particular pathways.

Overall, a robust body of evidence spanning decades shows that discrimination and bias, whether overt or unconscious, in hiring and recruitment significantly limits access to stable, well-paid jobs for Bangladeshi, Black African, Pakistani and other minority candidates (Zschirnt and Ruedin, 2016; Heath and Di Stasio, 2019; Veit and Thijsen, 2021; Zwysen, Di Stasio and Heath, 2021). In relative terms, there has been

little change since the 1980s and quite possibly even earlier, despite significant changes in organisational policies and equality legislation.

The comparatively more flexible labour market conditions in the UK do not seem to lead employers to take the 'risk' of hiring ethnic minority candidates, nor do the long historical and cultural ties with Britain's former colonies seem to provide any advantage to the applicants (Larsen and Di Stasio, 2021). When compared with Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain, the UK stands out in being possibly more discriminatory towards UK-born ethnic minority applicants (Veit and Thijsen, 2021). Perceptions of cultural distance seem to trump actual cultural familiarity.

At the same time, groups similarly discriminated against at the point of hiring do not necessarily experience the same level of employment penalties, suggesting variations in socio-economic resources and supply-side differences among these groups (Carmichael and Woods, 2000; Li, 2020; Zwysen, Di Stasio and Heath, 2021). That is, a group subjected to high levels of discrimination when applying for jobs does not necessarily experience an equivalent degree of poorer employment outcomes once in work. Factors such as educational attainment, financial or social resources, and different coping strategies can mitigate or, in some cases, exacerbate the negative effects of discrimination.

Li (2020), in his expansive review of social progress in the UK over the past 50 years, finds that Indians and Chinese groups in particular are even outperforming the White population in some areas, while Black Caribbean men, Black Africans, and Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups struggle especially in relation to entry to better jobs.

Effective mitigating strategies could include using stronger social networks that bypass formal applications or occupation-specific strategies, such as switching to self-employment or targeting public-sector jobs (Li, 2020; Zwysen et al., 2021).

Discriminatory recruitment practices, from CV sifting to interviewing and hiring decisions, contribute directly to the ethnic penalties observed in employment outcomes. Field experiments make clear that these penalties are not due only to personal choices or qualifications but reflect employers' biases and discriminatory practices and processes: researchers find a strong correspondence between the measured hiring of certain groups, discrimination and their actual employment disadvantages. As a result, racism in hiring and recruitment is a major barrier keeping Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani workers out of higher-paying and secure jobs in the UK.

Workplace culture and social networks

Workplace cultures play a profoundly significant and multifaceted role in creating persistent barriers to career progression and development for ethnic minorities in the UK. Workplace culture, broadly defined as 'the way things are done around here' (Deal and Kennedy, 1982, cited in Bradley et al., 2007, p. vii), encompasses both formal structures, such as official policies and procedures, and informal practices, including daily interactions, unspoken rules and communication networks (Bradley et al., 2007).

These cultures often operate through subtle, informal mechanisms, which, when it comes to discrimination, can be even quite insidious, leading to significant

implementation gaps between stated equality policies and lived experiences (Bradley et al., 2007; Hudson et al., 2013).

A key study by Hudson and colleagues (2013) argues that persistent in-work poverty, as well as the high prevalence of low-paid work among ethnic minority groups, is significantly influenced by informal workplace cultures, including power imbalances between managers and low-paid workers that may undermine formal equal opportunities policies.

The evidence of this large-scale qualitative study is compiled from case studies of several organisations, including interviews with 65 low-paid workers and 43 managers across both public and private sectors. Overall, worker accounts suggest that employers' pockets of negative informal practice in their organisations are undermining formal equal opportunities policies and procedures. These unofficial organisational norms of behaviour affect ethnic minority workers disproportionately and strengthen low-wage traps (Hudson et al., 2013; 2017).

Industries with a high prevalence of informal hiring, such as hospitality, construction and certain care sectors, are more prone to perpetuating tight-knit social hiring. A key, often hidden, mechanism perpetuating disadvantage is 'homosocial reproduction' (Hudson et al., 2017), understood as the tendency for individuals in positions of power (historically predominantly White men) to favour and promote those who are similar to themselves in terms of race, gender and social background. This results in network-based social closure that creates a 'glass ceiling' or a 'racial filter' (Cashmore, 2001; Hudson et al., 2017; see also, McGregor-Smith, 2017; Clarke

and Smith, 2024).

What develops as a result is a ‘shadow structure’ or a chief officers’ ‘club’ (in the context of the police), which acts as an informal, hidden, and exclusive support group that provides favoured individuals with ‘social network volition’, an invisible guiding hand that provides access to key information, mentoring and sponsorship, while unfavoured groups are told to rely solely on their individual effort (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015; Clarke and Smith, 2024).

Ethnic minorities often lack access to these influential social networks, which are crucial for gaining vital information, mentorship, and support necessary for career advancement (Hudson et al., 2017; McGregor-Smith, 2017; Kele et al., 2022; Clarke and Smith, 2024). Their networks tend to be limited to fellow members in their ethnic minority groups, who often face similar disadvantages& (Netto et al., 2015; Foster and George, 2025). This deficiency in linking social capital means they miss out on job referrals, career guidance and opportunities to demonstrate their potential.

For Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani workers, a lack of connections in mainstream economy professional or managerial networks can impede access to better-paying roles in finance, technology and other high-status sectors. Conversely, long-standing institutional structures in parts of the public sector (for example, certain NHS roles) may offer more transparent and regulated recruitment processes, although evidence of discrimination remains. Such dynamics can reinforce patterns of ethnic employment segregation (McGregor-Smith, 2017).

Relying on social networks where businesses operated by ethnic minority owners predominantly employ co-ethnic workers does provide more accessible job opportunities and meets immediate needs (often in conditions where options are few at best), as well as limit exposure to experiences of racism. At the same time, inadvertently, they reinforce ethnic clustering as well as occupational clustering and thereby, paradoxically, have similar effects to structural and everyday racism and discriminatory policies where opportunities for mobility or skill development are limited, perpetuating lower earnings and higher risk of in-work poverty.

Studies for JRF have produced important evidence on how and whether networks of relationships help to advance the goals of ethnic minority individuals and communities (Gilchrist and Kyprianou, 2011; Hudson et al., 2013; McCabe et al., 2013; Finney, Kapadia and Peters, 2015). In a study exploring the relationship between poverty, ethnicity and social networks from a range of ethnicities and income brackets in Birmingham, Liverpool and Cumbria, including Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African participants, the findings were mixed (McCabe et al., 2013).

Through analysis of qualitative evidence, it was found that while social networks could help ethnic groups cope with or escape from poverty, by for example, providing community-based financial support, they could also restrict ambition and constrain efforts to move on in life. Similarly, Battu, Seaman and Zenou (2011) investigated the role of job search methods among ethnic minority groups in the UK. Using data from 12 consecutive waves of the UK Quarterly Labour Force Survey from 1998 to 2001, the authors focused on working-age males to compare the effectiveness of different job search channels across ethnic groups, specifically examining how personal networks

versus more formal methods relate to employment outcomes.

While some aspects of job search dynamics may have changed in the past decade-and-a-half, the study established that ethnic minority job seekers, particularly those from Pakistani/Bangladeshi and Indian backgrounds, show a higher propensity to rely on personal networks (that is, friends and family) in their search for employment compared to their White counterparts (Battu, Seaman and Zenou, 2011).

Despite the popularity of such networks among these groups, the findings suggest that reliance on informal channels results in a lower probability of securing employment and is associated with the attainment of jobs at lower socio-economic levels. The analysis further demonstrates that the effectiveness of personal networks appears to be influenced by the degree of integration into the mainstream labour markets (Battu, Seaman and Zenou, 2011; Gilchrist and Kyprianou, 2011).

In particular, immigrants who were not born in the UK and/or have not spent enough time in the country to establish themselves and form broader connections rely more heavily on ethnic community networks. Yet the nature of their contacts, which tend to be confined to similarly disadvantaged circles, risks undermining the potential benefits.

Salway's (2008) ethnographic study of inner-city London young Bangladeshi men shows through lived experience how the reliance on dense intra-ethnic networks constrains job aspirations and reinforces segregation from mainstream labour market institutions, even if they simultaneously provide a source of support and access to employment opportunities within the community. The study also highlights

how racial discrimination, both overt and covert, as well as structural factors such as the spatial concentration of Bangladeshi communities, contribute to the limited employment options available to these young men.

In addition, the research underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of ethnic identity. Young Bangladeshi men are shown to negotiate multiple forms of identity, including 'street', religious and professional identities, as they attempt to reposition themselves within the labour market. However, these negotiation processes often result in ambivalence between and within the overlapping identities and cultural influences, as individuals both affirm and distance themselves from certain aspects of their own cultural heritage as well as those of the dominant culture.

The effects of social networks are complex. Co-ethnic social networks provide access to jobs, as well as a sense of belonging and community. They can and arguably do, however, have segregating effects and tie people to job pathways that do not provide significant possibilities for advancement, or perhaps even job security.

Co-ethnic social networks are perhaps best understood as a collective coping mechanism in the face of discrimination and adversity. The segregating dynamics of social networks are not easy to combat. As Hudson and colleagues (2017) argue, efforts to strengthen cross-cultural networks are necessary but not sufficient, as social connections between employees and managers embody flows of power and influence drawn on in recruitment and promotion processes, privileging some ethnic groups and fostering the disadvantage of others.

There remains a lack of in-depth evidence and understanding of the social capital dynamics that may be helping to shape the experiences and hardship of ethnic groups over-represented in deep poverty.

Blatant and banal racism

Finally, ethnic minority individuals experience at work both explicit racial abuse and subtle, persistent forms of racism — often termed 'everyday' or 'banal' racism. This can manifest as a steady flow of remarks that mark them as 'different', 'alien', or 'other' (Bradley et al., 2007; Harris and Ogbonna, 2016). More explicit forms include blatant racial abuse from customers and clients. Two-thirds of Black and minority ethnic individuals have reported racial harassment or bullying in the workplace (McGregor-Smith, 2017), indicating that despite decades of efforts, change has not been as significant as one might hope (Batnitzky and McDowell, 2011).

In 2022 the TUC anti-racism taskforce supported a poll of 1,750 ethnic minority workers. It found that 2 in 5 had experienced racism at work in the previous 5 years, 27% faced racist jokes or banter, and 31% reported negative mental health impacts. Only 19% reported incidents to employers; many feared their reports would not be taken seriously (TUC, 2022). Contributing to under-reporting were systemic issues around the over-representation of Black workers in insecure, low-paid jobs; disparities in promotion, training and disciplinary actions; and institutional failures to address complaints effectively.

Racial microaggressions, such as assumptions of lower education, intelligence, contextual understanding and familiarity with British cultural references or English

proficiency, are common and contribute to feelings of isolation and invisibility (Estacio and Saidy-Khan, 2014; Tereshchenko et al., 2024; see also Newman et al., 2025).

Individuals often fear 'rocking the boat' by raising concerns about racism, believing it will damage their career prospects (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). Foreign accents, irrespective of English proficiency, can also act as a 'linguistic penalty', shaping perceptions of job fitness and hindering recruitment and promotion prospects (McGregor-Smith, 2017).

Intersectionality

It is crucial to understand that these experiences of discrimination and marginalisation are often not experienced in isolation but are compounded by the intersectionality of multiple identity categories, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, age, disability and class. Bradley and colleagues (2007) explore the experiences of Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Pakistani women in the UK labour market.

Using a multi-method qualitative approach involving interviews, focus groups and case studies in 6 organisations, their report identifies structural and cultural barriers that impede the participation and advancement of ethnic minority women in the labour market. Their study highlights that ethnic minority women face a combination of overt and covert discrimination, which limits their access to higher-paying roles and career advancement. As one Black Caribbean woman articulated, it can feel like a 'double whammy, being a woman and then being a Black woman' (Bradley et al., 2007, p. 44).

In fact, intersectional studies consistently reveal that the experiences of ethnic minority women in the British labour market are profoundly shaped by the complex interplay of various social identities, including gender, ethnicity and religion (Khattab and Hussein, 2018; Kele et al., 2022). This multifaceted disadvantage goes beyond a simple additive model where different forms of discrimination merely stack up. Instead, these identities interact dynamically, creating unique and often intensified forms of inequality (Bradley et al., 2007; Khattab and Hussein, 2018).

This creates a complex web of 'multiply burdened' experiences (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152), where individuals face greater inequalities due to their multiple subordinate-group identities and whose analysis requires maintaining an intersectional lens. Attempts to isolate or disentangle these intertwined forms of discrimination risk oversimplifying the lived realities of these individuals and developing ineffective, fragmented solutions. A genuinely effective approach must acknowledge and actively engage with the complex, dynamic interplay of identities and their compounding effects on experiences of inequality.

Such dynamics underscore how direct and implicit racism can systematically exclude minority candidates from higher-paying jobs in professional and more secure sectors, and sometimes from the labour market altogether. For example, the role of religion and cultural religious expression, with Islamic dress (for example, hijab or niqab) frequently serves as a basis for discrimination, despite employer protestations and anti-discrimination legislation, in recruitment and beyond (Dale, 2002; Khattab et al., 2011; Khattab, 2012; Khattab and Modood, 2015; Di Stasio et al., 2021).

This can lead to individuals being excluded from social interactions and informal networking within the workplace, as well as being overlooked for promotion (Dale, 2002; Tariq and Syed, 2018; Kele et al., 2022). Larger family sizes can also mean longer periods outside the labour force, and some Bangladeshi women may experience greater isolation and less knowledge of the labour market (Bradley et al., 2007). Many report being over-qualified for their low-paid positions (Wood and Wybron, 2015).

These factors can then be combined with further intersections, such as cultural and family norms, residential clustering and migration histories. For example, some traditional cultural and family expectations can influence labour market participation, with some Bangladeshi women, for instance, preferring jobs close to home or in environments with other ethnic minority women, or facing family pressures against working outside the home (Bradley et al., 2007; Khattab et al., 2011).

At the same time, the communities where these women live are often residentially concentrated in deprived areas, which can limit job opportunities (Bradley et al., 2007; Khattab, 2012). While some studies suggest ethnic economies in these areas might offer a protected labour market and freedom from racism, most Muslim women still seek jobs in the mainstream labour market (Khattab, 2012).

Finally, migration status may be a significant factor. For first-generation migrants, a lack of prior labour market experience, limited English language skills or unfamiliarity with the general culture of the UK labour market can be additional barriers (Foster and George, 2025). However, among second-generation women, evolving views on

caregiving, better education and exposure to working female relatives are reshaping the balance between work and care (for a discussion, see Bucelli and Karagiannaki, 2025).

There is much still to be explored as these dynamics play out. For instance, exploring how the experiences of younger, UK-born Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, who are often better qualified, differ from older, first-generation Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, or understanding what new barriers they might encounter despite their qualifications, why, and how these might be overcome.

There is also a broader research gap around other forms of intersectional identities, which reflects a need to move beyond simple ethnic categorisations. For example, how does the intersection of ethnicity, disability and age help to shape experiences and interact with the situated context of life chances, particularly in a climate in which workers are expected to work for longer and inequalities in wealth persist? How do mental and physical health problems interact with the experience of in-work inequalities of men and women from different ethnic groups?

Overall, large-scale quantitative studies reveal that the factors hindering progression and promotion at work are complex and not easily attributable to a single or even a small number of causes. However, they also irrevocably show that some hindrances are inexplicable through observable factor analysis and that ethnic penalties are in play.

Qualitative studies shed light on the nature and dynamics of these penalties by revealing the long histories and power dynamics of workplace racism in its various

forms. There is a particular need to better understand the labour market experiences of UK-born women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage and to make more visible other forms of intersectional identities.

Visa status and in-work inequalities

Visa status significantly determines an individual's level of access to both the labour market and welfare entitlements (Ashiagbor, 2021). When discussing the role of visa status in relation to in-work inequalities, it is important to remember that the terms 'migrant', 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' have very different meanings. While there is no widely accepted definition of a migrant (Dias-Abey and Bales, 2023), broadly speaking a migrant is someone who moves to another country to work, study or reunite with family, either temporarily or permanently.

Research drawing on the Family Resources Survey (FRS) (Hughes and Kenway, 2016) and both the FRS and Households Below Average Income data (Qureshi and Morris, 2025) finds that children in families with non-UK-born parents are more likely to live in households in relative poverty. People who move to the UK also face a disproportionately high risk of destitution (being unable to meet their most basic needs to be warm, dry, clean and fed). In 2022, their destitution risk was 35% higher than average (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Bucelli and Karagiannaki (2025) have recently scrutinised the issues visa status raises for family poverty.

Being non-UK-born can have significant implications for labour market experiences that contribute to in-work poverty. Immigration controls are a key dynamic. These

implications operate not only as mechanisms that regulate the supply of labour, but also as forces that shape its form. By defining categories of entry, imposing specific employment conditions and cultivating institutionalised uncertainty, these controls help produce labour types with distinct relationships to employers and labour markets.

In conjunction with more informal migratory pathways, they contribute to the creation of 'precarious workers' concentrated in particular occupations and sectors with precarious norms (Anderson, 2010; Ashiagbor, 2021; Dias-Abey and Bales, 2023; Lewis and Waite, 2015; Lewis et al., 2014; Vickers, 2015). The remainder of this section will explore these dynamics. In so doing, it will be helpful to distinguish between the asylum and non-asylum immigration systems. While largely engaging with non-asylum immigration, given the prohibition to work policy for asylum seekers, the review will also recognise the salience of asylum seeker experience (Targarona Rifa and Donà, 2021).

The 10-year route to settlement and in-work inequalities

Immigration controls can have a significant impact on the labour market experiences and outcomes of people entering the UK under varying circumstances, including South Asian and African groups coming to work. Securing permanent settlement status in the UK offers significantly greater advantages than holding time-limited leave to remain. Notably, it provides migrants with the long-term stability of a mostly permanent immigration status and lifts restrictions on working that can confine people to low-paid sectors.

It also brings to an end the ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) condition applied to many visas, a condition that restricts access to most state benefits and housing assistance. However, the Government is currently consulting on whether to continue to apply NRPF until someone has been granted citizenship.

At present, most migrants coming through formal routes to work, study or join family holding a valid visa are generally able to apply for settlement in the UK after completing 5 years of lawful residence. For example, those on family visas Spouse, Unmarried Partner and Civil Partner visas) and those on work visas (Skilled Worker visa and Health and Care Worker visa).

Some people are subjected to a 10-year route to settlement, which requires them to spend 10 years in continuous lawful residence in the UK before they are able to apply for indefinite leave to remain. People on the 10-year route have permission to stay in the UK due to family or long-term ties; they may not qualify for the current baseline 5-year settlement route due to factors like failing to meet the £18,600 income threshold or experiencing gaps in leave from missed application deadlines, sometimes caused by circumstances beyond their control such as domestic violence or health issues (Mort et al., 2023).

Mort and colleagues (2023) report on findings from a survey of over 300 migrants who are already on or who had been on the 10-year route to settlement. The authors note that this immigration pathway is frequently taken by women, individuals with caregiving responsibilities and those from Black and South Asian communities.

Most people on the 10-year route have lived in the UK for a significant period, with 60% of survey participants being UK residents for more than 10 years. A large number are employed in low-wage roles, with common occupations including care workers, home carers, cleaners and domestic workers. These people face considerable financial strain within their households.

The findings point to how the 10-year route, particularly the high costs, requirement to renew visas every 2 and a half years, legal complexities and restrictions to welfare due to NRPF, can destabilise employment and increase poverty risks (Mort et al., 2023). Respondents reported that the frequent renewal process: made it harder to keep a job (28%), made it harder to find a job (27%) and made it difficult to secure permanent employment (26%).

While less common, a troubling minority of respondents experienced forced labour, being made to work against their will (7%) and dangerous working conditions (6%). Several factors potentially contribute to these adverse labour market outcomes, including the impacts of being on a temporary status whilst renewing a visa, and how a lack of proof of ongoing entitlements and poor understanding of the law from employers can lead to people losing work (Mort et al., 2023).

Lengthy immigration procedures and NRPF restrictions place additional financial burdens on migrants, who must work longer hours in order to meet high visa fees or support their families. As a result, income from employment is often insufficient to meet basic living needs. The stress and anxiety of waiting for a Home Office visa renewal decision can lead to people being suspended from work or struggling to find

a job.

Those with caring responsibilities, who are already prevented from accessing state-funded support for caring, often cannot work full-time; as such, their income from work is restricted, making it even harder for them to afford visa renewal fees (Mort et al., 2023). In turn, this increases the risk of migrant carers falling out of status altogether and losing their job. This situation contributes to in-work poverty, ongoing hardship and destitution.

The growing number of individuals placed on the 10-year settlement route – and the potential plans to make this the default qualifying settlement period – further increases the risk that labour market earnings will fail to provide adequate returns. A current immigration policy white paper proposes increasing the baseline qualifying period for settlement visa categories from 5 years to 10 years (Home Office, 2025a).

A follow-up consultation on pathways to settlement proposes a 'time-adjustment' model in which settlement time frames can be reduced or increased based on certain factors (Home Office, 2025b). For example, settlement time frames would increase by up to a further 10 years (so 20 years in total) if applicants had received public funds (likely through having the NRPF condition lifted). Similarly, the Government is seeking feedback on a proposal to increase the qualifying settlement period to 15 years for those on the Skilled Worker route who are low-wage/low-skilled workers.

Conversely, settlement periods would be reduced for high-income migrants, those employed in specific public service occupations and those who can evidence that they have volunteered in the community (Home Office, 2025b).

The Government is also consulting on plans to extend the length of time that the NRPF condition can be applied. It is proposing a change in the law which would result in NRPF still applying even after settled status has been granted. In this case, the condition would only be removed once a person becomes a UK citizen (Home Office, 2025b).

Increasing the time migrants spend without access to the social security system exacerbates their risk of poverty and hardship; this heightened risk would fall acutely on those migrants on low earnings, which would ordinarily be topped up by Universal Credit were they to have access.

Additionally, there is evidence that visa fees and childcare costs are making it harder for the financial returns from work to cover needs. This will be most noticeable where work visas are tied to low-paid sectors. For example, immigration-based restrictions on childcare entitlements inhibit opportunities for parents under NRPF to get a job or increase their hours of work (Qureshi and Morris, 2025).

Research undertaken for Citizens Advice by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford found that 82% of people they supported with NRPF issues in the past year were from Black (31%), Asian (32%) or other minority ethnic backgrounds (19%), restrictions falling disproportionately on people of colour (Citizens Advice, 2020). Prolonged settlement processes can have substantial economic consequences, affecting both individual migrants and key UK industries that rely on global talent.

Research is needed to explore whether the proposed extension of the baseline settlement period to 10 years, development of a ‘time adjusted’ settlement model and

changes to the NRPF condition increase in-work inequalities and for which ethnic groups. This would help bolster the evidence base around migration, hardship, ethnicity and work going forward.

Evidence of migrant exploitation at work

The Skilled Worker visa system operates on a sponsorship model that ties a migrant's right to remain in the UK to their employer. Increased salary thresholds have also reportedly limited access to this international recruitment pathway in various industries, for example abattoir butchery and construction (National Audit Office, 2025).

In a recent report, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC, 2025) finds that the migrant dependency relationship with employers heightens the risk of exploitation, leaving workers vulnerable to coercive practices. Evidence submitted to the PAC's inquiry reveals widespread abuse. This includes debt bondage, excessive working hours and poor conditions.

Skrivankova is among those scholars who view labour exploitation as existing along a continuum, with severe forms such as forced labour at one extreme and fair, decent employment at the other (Skrivankova, 2010). The findings of the PAC inquiry are indicative of experiences at the severe end of the spectrum reflecting 'labour-rights violations', including extreme forms of mistreatment (Dias-Abey and Bales, 2023).

Forced labour should be seen as both a component and a consequence of the broader trend of normalising precarious employment (Lewis and Waite, 2015).

Viewing forced labour through the framework of precarity highlights how severe exploitation is often embedded within wider systemic abuse that particularly affects migrant workers (Lewis and Waite, 2015).

Concerns about the exploitation of internationally recruited workers have centred on those workers coming to work in health and social care. Under the Skilled Worker route, a separate Health and Care Worker visa operates, introduced in 2020 to tackle chronic staffing shortages. It also restricts workers to a single employer.

Skills For Care (2024) reports that amongst the 12 most common nationalities of the non-British adult social care workforce were Bangladeshi (2%), Pakistani (2%), Nigerian (22%), Zimbabwean (8%) and Ghanaian (5%). If workers arriving in the UK via this scheme lose their job, they have just 60 days to find a new sponsor or face deportation. This creates a power imbalance and discourages the reporting of abuse (Skills for Care, 2024).

In addition, multiple organisations document serious flaws in the current immigration system, providing insights into negative labour market experiences. The UK anti-modern slavery campaigning organisation Unseen reports that the Health and Social Care Worker visa scheme has increasingly become a conduit for exploitation and abuse.

A recent Helpline Annual Assessment, which is widely regarded as one of the UK's most detailed sources on modern slavery and human trafficking, recorded a 30% increase in the number of potential health and social care visa victims identified in 2023 (Carter, 2024).Unseen reports on documented cases where workers are

pressured into signing contracts that impose hefty financial penalties simply for leaving their employer in pursuit of better working conditions (Carter, 2024).

These exploitative clauses often trap individuals in intolerable environments, making it economically unfeasible to walk away. Similarly, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has reported a rise in the number of enquiries it has received about a range of issues related to exploitation, particularly where workers have incurred debts to agents or employers for visa fees, travel or training (RCN, 2024; Church, 2025).

There is also some official Government data on exploitative practices. Between April and June 2025, the UK Home Office received 5,690 referrals of potential victims of modern slavery, a record high. The data indicated that labour exploitation was most common amongst males. Eritrean nationals, prominent amongst UK asylum grants, accounted for 11% of referrals (Home Office, 2025c).

Bangladeshi nationals were among the top 10 nationalities referred (Home Office, 2025c). There is an ongoing need for research around labour exploitation. To gather insightful, qualitative evidence, trusting relationships will need to be built with those affected.

International students and work inequalities

International students are also potentially vulnerable. In recent decades, they have actively been encouraged to come to the UK on visas that allow them to combine paid work with study (Howe, 2019; Spencer, 2011). Hours of work are restricted to a limit of 20 hours per week on Tier 4 student visas, and individuals often take low-paid

jobs classified as unskilled (Migration Advisory Committee, cited in Howe, 2018).

Recent data shows that in the 2022–23 academic year, the majority of international students studied for a master's degree, and that most Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Nigerian nationals on student visas were doing so (ONS, 2025b). In 2022, Nigeria was in the top 3 countries of origin for international students at 9%, the other 2 being China (26%) and India (23%) (Cuibus and Walsh, 2024).

Among the reasons that international students are vulnerable in the labour market are their age, their limited experience and their lack of local support through networks. Consequently, they often struggle to find and keep paid jobs (Howe, 2019). However, those students who have been in the UK for a while are likely to have local networks and improved language skills, helping them to avoid exploitative middlemen (Sumption and Brindle, 2025).

Visa rules that limit work hours shape how international students access jobs and expose them to the risk of precarious work. Breaching the rules can lead to visa cancellation or deportation. Together, these policies create a precarious position, intensifying the difficulties students encounter in finding paid work and making them less likely to report exploitation (Howe, 2019).

In the care sector workforce, international students have long filled low-paid vacancies (Cangiano et al., 2009). Analysis of Home Office Immigration statistics shows that in 2024, about 40% of international students who moved from study to Skilled Worker visas entered care work, often in roles below their qualifications (Sumption and Brindle, 2025). This may limit their skill development and long-term

career mobility. However, these switchers appear less vulnerable to exploitation than overseas hires, being less likely to work for employers whose licences were later revoked.

Although international student exploitation is a concern, there remains a notable lack of in-depth research on the issue. Salient areas such as the kinds of jobs being undertaken, underpayment and wage theft, breaches of visa-imposed working hour limits, intimidation through visa cancellation threats, and the role of fraudulent recruitment agents are particularly underexplored.

Asylum seekers, refugees and work inequalities

In 2024, most asylum seekers in the UK were from Asian countries (42%), followed by African nationals (21%). The most common Asian nationalities were Pakistani, Afghan, Bangladeshi and Indian, and the most common African nationalities were Eritrean and Sudanese (Kirk-Wade and Barton, 2025). The next largest regional groupings were Middle Eastern (18%) and European (13%). Around 6% of main applicants were from countries in the Americas, Oceania and other parts of the world (Kirk-Wade and Barton, 2025).

Asylum seekers are unable to work unless they have not received a decision on their claim within 12 months (and only then if this delay is through no fault of the applicant). After being granted permission to work by the Home Office, asylum seekers are limited to employment opportunities listed on the Immigration Salary List. The Home Office does not publish data on the number of asylum seekers granted permission to work (Gower et al., 2024).

Most asylum seekers cannot work, and they survive on very low subsistence rates if they are in receipt of Asylum Support. Many arrive in the UK with nothing and for the most part depend on state support for their basic needs. One Glasgow-based qualitative study of their experiences draws on 50 interviews conducted in 2018 with 16 asylum seekers and 14 refugees and staff from various organisations in Glasgow (Ramachandran, 2024).

Participants described how asylum seekers face destitution, relying only on small weekly allowances since they cannot work or access benefits. While they were able to manage in the short term, they criticised the inadequacy of these allowances in the long run. Many of the participants relied on charities for food due to a lack of funds (Ramachandran, 2024). In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that wider research on destitution in the UK identifies asylum seekers as a key group experiencing destitution and refused asylum seekers as facing even higher risks (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018).

In this context, asylum seekers have been described as facing an invidious 'choice' between forced unemployment or undocumented work (Targarona Rifa and Donà, 2021). In qualitative research with 52 asylum seekers and refugees (including, for example, Sudanese, Rwandan and Pakistani men and women), the researchers reported on how having the opportunity to work contributes not just to a person's sense of dignity and confidence but also to their standing and recognition both within their household and in the broader community. Being able to work also plays an emotional role, for example in supporting aspirations for the future (Targarona Rifa and Donà, 2021).

This is one of the few studies to focus on the specific experiences of asylum seekers who work in the undocumented sector while in the asylum system. It draws out the fear of being discovered working, which can have adverse consequences for asylum claims and lead to deportation. The accounts of the research participants also reinforce that having an undocumented job is generally linked to exploitation, including low pay and irregular hours of work and working long hours for very low pay (Targarona Rifa and Donà, 2021).

On being granted refugee status, people ostensibly have unrestricted access to employment. However, many encounter barriers to paid work and are often underemployed, taking jobs below their qualification status, as found in the analysis of the LFS and Survey of New Refugees, a longitudinal study conducted between 2005 and 2007 with all new refugees over 18 (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2017).

Cheung and Phillimore also use the Survey of New Refugees to investigate how social capital affects new refugees' integration into the UK labour market. They find that longer UK residency and better language skills expand social networks, which help with employment and housing. However, having networks alone does not guarantee job access; rather, a lack of them hinders it. The type of social capital does not affect job quality or stability. Instead, language ability, prior qualifications and time in the UK are key. These findings highlight the need to prioritise language training in asylum and integration policies (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013).

A government paper on asylum policy sets out various reforms that could lead to further restrictions for asylum seekers and those granted refugee status; these will

form part of a future consultation. Proposed changes include revoking the current legal obligation to support asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute; any support would instead be conditional and denied under some circumstances. Refugees would also be subjected to a longer baseline settlement pathway of 20 years (Home Office, 2025d). These measures would likely increase the risk of destitution.

There continues to be a lack of research on the workplace experiences of migrants and asylum seekers. This includes undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as graduates who transition from a student visa to a work visa. Future research might usefully involve collaborations between researchers, faith and anti-modern slavery organisations, and trade unions reaching out to migrants and asylum seekers to build more awareness and understanding of workplace experiences, identifying the incidence and contours of exploitation, labour-rights violations and support needs.

3. Addressing ethnicity and race-related in-work inequalities through public policy

With rapid progress achieved on reducing low pay, the focus of labour market reform has shifted to job quality (Cominetti and McCurdy, 2025). This section briefly reviews progress on low pay before looking at planned reforms that engage with job quality and in-work inequalities that pertain to disadvantaged ethnic minority communities. Those reforms arguably mark a movement away from voluntary employer action in areas pertinent to ethnic in-work inequalities, towards more far-reaching regulation.

Regulation of pay and ethnic pay gaps

The UK introduced a National Minimum Wage in April 1999 to address exploitative low pay. Recent research shows that 2 decades later, Bangladeshi and Pakistani employees have the highest coverage (McKnight, 2022), reflecting the over-representation of these ethnic groups in low-paying sectors and micro entities.

Evidence prepared for the UK Low Pay Commission (LPC) suggests that minimum wages have had a strong positive effect on earnings and have been successful in reducing earnings inequality in the UK (see Clark, Cotofan and Layard, 2021). Despite this progress, it remains important to acknowledge that the National Living Wage is distinct from the RLW, particularly in the context of a cost-of-living crisis. The RLW is

calculated according to what needs to be earned for an acceptable living standard.

Despite progress on improving the wage floor, equality pay gaps remain. Pertinent to addressing ethnic pay penalties is the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill, introduced in the UK Government's 2024 legislative agenda. An important feature of this Bill is its efforts to address systemic inequalities by extending Mandatory Ethnicity Pay Gap Reporting (EHRC, 2018). Under the Bill's provisions, employers with 250-plus employees will be required to publish ethnicity and disability pay gap data on an annual basis, disclosing:

- mean and median pay gaps
- bonus pay gaps
- workforce breakdowns by ethnicity and disability
- disclosure rates for demographic data.

The aim is to try to ensure that employer decisions about pay and employees are evidence-based and fair. Legally requiring employers to publish pay gap data ostensibly compels companies to make disparities transparent, account for those disparities and support long-term efforts to reduce them.

Gender Pay Gap reporting offers useful insights into the efficacy of pay gap reporting. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) analysis shows that in 2024, UK employers reported the lowest median and mean gaps since 2017, though progress remains slow (Cotton, 2024). Fewer employers now provide explanatory narratives, highlighting the need for deeper analysis and action on gap drivers.

In this vein, it is important to recognise concerns that the planned legislative changes with respect to ethnic pay gap reporting have teeth. For example, this has been expressed by Action for Race Equality. In responding to the UK Government's consultation on mandatory Ethnicity and Disability Pay Gap Reporting, the organisation calls for the eventual inclusion of smaller employers (Action for Race Equality, 2025). Expanding the coverage of reporting requirements would help broaden coverage and offer a more accurate and comprehensive picture of the ethnicity pay gap across the UK.

The number of private sector businesses in the UK at the start of 2023 was 5.6 million; 5.51 million businesses were small (0–49 employees), 36,900 businesses were medium-sized (50–249 employees) and 8,000 businesses were large (250 or more employees) (Department for Business and Trade, 2023).

To move beyond mere data collection and strengthen employer accountability, Action for Race Equality urges that narratives and action plans be mandatory from the start. Narratives should explain the nature and causes of pay gaps, while action plans should detail the steps employers are taking to address them. This approach ensures that reporting is not just about numbers but also about meaningful change (Action for Race Equality, 2025).

The proposal for Mandatory Ethnicity Pay Gap reporting raises important questions about how well employers understand what is expected of them and why it matters. Action plans should be supported by resources that help facilitate the reduction of bias and prejudice in hiring, promotion and pay decisions. Such efforts are essential

for improving protections against racial discrimination and enhancing job quality.

Organisations like the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) will play a key role in guiding employers through this process. Their support, through advice, training and resources, will be crucial to making ethnic pay gap reporting effective in reducing disparities. Additionally, strong enforcement mechanisms will be vital to ensure employers comply with reporting requirements.

As Mandatory Ethnicity Pay Gap reporting is introduced, mixed methods research needs to engage with the degree of employer compliance, experience and outcomes, helping to raise awareness and understanding of implementation challenges, as well as disseminate better practice. This might usefully include sectors in which Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani workers are clustered. As pay gap regulations expand from gender to include ethnicity and disability, fostering intersectional data analysis can deepen our understanding of systemic inequalities.

Addressing insecure work and promoting fair and sustainable livelihoods

The over-representation of Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities in precarious work is indicative of the need for a policy shift to focus on job quality to help address the inequalities they encounter. Some scholars have argued for the introduction of ‘Job Quality Gap reporting’ (for example, Williams et al., 2024), but the Government has taken a different approach with an ambitious Employment Rights Bill (ERB). Among other things, it is engaging with deeper structural issues

surrounding failure in the flexible jobs market that affect those who cannot access a good, secure job.

This group includes workers with unstable hours and income, many of whom struggle to secure sufficient working time. It also encompasses individuals with care-giving responsibilities or health-related needs that limit their ability to work or increase their hours. Additionally, some workers do not consistently receive the rights or benefits they are entitled to. Aiming to address in-work poverty by raising the minimum standards for work, the ERB seeks to support workers by:

- enhancing income security through contracts that reflect hours that are typically worked, improved notice periods for shifts, and compensation for cancelled work
- strengthening the ability to remain in the workforce during care-giving responsibilities, by expanding rights to parental leave
- ensuring income protection during ill health and recovery, by removing statutory sick pay eligibility criteria that currently exclude low earners and eliminating waiting days, so support begins immediately
- promoting better balance between work, care, and health needs, by requiring employers to justify any refusal of flexible working requests with clear and reasonable explanations.

There are long-standing concerns about the enforcement of employment rights (Dickens, 2012; Papadopoulos, Lopez-Andreu and Jamalian, 2021). It is therefore commendable that the ERB proposes the creation of the Fair Work Agency, a

centralised body responsible for enforcing specific employment rights that are currently managed by multiple agencies. The Bill grants the Government the power to extend the agency's remit to cover further employment rights over time.

The new Fair Work Agency must be properly funded and resourced to stop bad employers undercutting good ones. Key to this is investing in more labour market inspectors to proactively enforce workplace rights, especially for those who face barriers to speaking up. Stronger enforcement should also ensure disabled people receive reasonable adjustments, improving access to quality jobs that meet their needs. This is important to the intersectional lived experience of ethnic minority communities.

When people move into work, a good initial job match is likely to have a positive impact on labour market outcomes. For many years now, the UK has followed a 'work first' approach in its Active Labour Market Policies, prioritising rapid entry into employment through a mix of behavioural requirements and support for employability.

Where this strategy results in unstable or unsuitable job placements, this potentially negatively affects ethnic minority communities more than others in a context in which the evidence suggests that ethnic minority workers struggle to progress in work more than their White British counterparts (Hudson et al., 2013). Emerging indications of a move away from the work-first model are encouraging, particularly for those communities disproportionately experiencing precarious work (Elgot, 2025; Work and Pensions Committee, 2025).

It is important to recognise that evaluations of active labour market policies have not tended to involve detailed engagement with the experiences of, and outcomes for, particular ethnic minority communities – perhaps influenced by the movement to wider programmes aimed at disadvantaged groups more generally (National Audit Office, 2008). This might be addressed through more comprehensive ethnicity-related monitoring of the experiences and outcomes relating to employment support policies going forward. A more nuanced approach is needed.

For example, recent evidence from a systematic literature review on employment support for Black people with long-term health conditions indicates that this group faces additional barriers. The main conclusion from the review was the paucity of academic literature that explicitly considered ethnicity or race in employment support. This is despite Black and disabled cohorts featuring disproportionately among those who are unemployed (Okoroji, Ibison and Robotham, 2024).

Challenging racism and combined discrimination at work

The evidence suggests that taking a race discrimination claim to an employment tribunal is extremely challenging (Aston et al., 2006; Hudson et al., 2007). One qualitative study, conducted before the Equality Act 2010, examined the experiences of 40 race discrimination claimants involved in employment tribunal cases under the Race Relations Act (Aston et al., 2006). Undertaken between May 2005 and February 2006, the sample — of 16 women and 24 men, mostly Asian or Black — revealed widespread feelings of unpreparedness and uncertainty about the hearings.

Among the claimants, 16 lacked legal representation, while others had support from unions or legal professionals. Many felt the Chair's attitude and ethnicity influenced their experience and confidence in receiving a fair hearing. Unrepresented claimants struggled to follow proceedings and felt disadvantaged compared to employers, who were typically well resourced and legally represented.

In a more recent TUC poll, many workers expressed distrust in formal systems, including tribunals, citing:

- lack of cultural competence among decision-makers
- inconsistent outcomes and high burden of proof on the claimant
- procedural complexity, legal costs, limited support and representation, especially for precariously employed workers.

While there is a lack of research comparing the experiences of different ethnic groups, the evidence base builds a picture of institutional racism within tribunal processes and employer responses that reinforces under-reporting and disengagement (TUC, 2022). Moreover, workers who experienced racism report negative mental health effects, loss of confidence and feelings of embarrassment, and a sense of futility in pursuing justice through formal channels (TUC, 2022).

Conciliation services offer a voluntary, informal way to settle workplace disputes through an independent mediator, often before a tribunal claim is made. A 2007 study explored unrepresented parties' experiences of Acas conciliation services in the context of race discrimination claims (Hudson et al., 2007).

One of the salient findings was around failings in grievance procedures. Interviews with 30 claimants and 10 respondents revealed that many claimants filed claims out of frustration with ineffective internal grievance procedures. These processes often failed to resolve issues, especially for those ethnic minority workers with limited English skills. Claimants felt that employers obstructed their efforts to raise concerns, and grievances were frequently passed between senior staff without action.

In some cases, employers only responded after a tribunal claim was filed. Some claimants did not know that a grievance procedure existed until after legal action had begun. Overall, the lack of effective grievance handling created space for unfair treatment, allowing even minor issues to escalate into serious problems.

Early conciliation was introduced in April 2014 under the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013. This is a free service offered by Acas that enables employees and employers to resolve workplace disputes through informal negotiation, potentially avoiding the need for a formal employment tribunal. Mandatory for most employment tribunal claims in the UK, the prospective claimants must contact Acas, participate in conciliation and receive an early conciliation certificate in order to make a claim to an employment tribunal.

Looking at available data on early conciliation forms relating to the race discrimination jurisdiction received by Acas in the last 3 years, there were 5,123 in 2021–22, 6,392 in 2022–23 and 6,519 in 2023–24 (Acas, 2024). However, early conciliation data is an insufficient proxy for experiences of racism at work. To reiterate, the economic situation of ethnic minority workers may make it difficult to

challenge racism (TUC, 2022).

The struggles faced by ethnic minority women often go unnoticed due to a fragmented approach in the anti-discrimination framework that considers race, gender and faith in isolation. The Equal Opportunities Commission was an early advocate of the need for intersectional analysis in policy-making (Bradley et al., 2007). Scholars have also critiqued the legal and institutional frameworks that fail to recognise combined discrimination (Solanke, 2009).

Although women are formally recognised under the Equality Act 2010, arguably, the law in its current form falls short of delivering real equality. Under section 14 of the Equality Act 2010, individuals can make a claim of dual or combined discrimination if they believe they were treated unfairly due to a combination of 2 protected characteristics, for example, being both female and Black African or both female and Bangladeshi. Section 14 allows for the bringing of a single complaint that addresses how both factors contributed to the discrimination. However, provisions on combined, or dual, discrimination are not currently activated.

The Labour Party expressed an intent to strengthen protections against dual discrimination if elected, and in 2025 the Government had a call for evidence to support the process of bringing section 14 into force. This is relevant to UK-born ethnic minorities and non-UK-born migrants in the UK. The latter also face discrimination for various reasons, like race or religion, as well as others unique to foreign-born individuals, such as accent or overseas qualifications.

These factors often overlap, making it hard to pinpoint the exact cause. For instance, a Somali-born worker may be judged based on ethnicity, religion, accent or credentials (Fernández-Reino and Cuibus, 2024). A small-scale exploratory study of 'multiple-strand' discrimination included interviews with advice workers (Hudson, 2012).

Advice workers generally perceived that cases involving single-strand discrimination were far more prevalent in their everyday work than those involving multiple-strand discrimination. Uncertainty surrounded whether this reflected the actual situation in workplaces or whether affected individuals were simply not seeking their guidance, or perhaps not identifying their experiences as instances of combined discrimination.

Given that discriminatory incidents often go unreported, this remains a difficult area to assess with confidence. Should section 14 come into force, training for advice workers might be beneficial in empowering them to better identify and support cases involving combined discrimination. Awareness campaigns might also empower workers to recognise and report more complex cases.

Overall, there have been few studies of experiences of challenging race discrimination using anti-discrimination legislation, and a dearth of research in recent decades. While existing studies have incorporated a range of ethnic minority groups, there is a lack of comparison of the situated contexts and experiences of those different groups.

Research might, for example, explore perceptions and experiences of complaining about discrimination in recruitment, pay and promotion, and ethnic and

intersectional differences in the context of institutional mechanisms for progressing and resolving discrimination claims. It might also evaluate efforts to avoid repeat employer offenders.

Discrimination based on a combination of protected characteristics continues to be under-researched. This includes the experiences of ethnic minority women seeking redress and the issues coming through the doors of advice agencies based in local communities. For example, the latter might provide a window on the racism and combined discrimination experienced by low-paid and precarious ethnic minority workers that would otherwise be hidden from view.

It is worth reiterating that scholars undertaking quantitative research maintain that sample sizes are often too limited, which contributes to research focusing solely on gender without considering intersectional perspectives, and this suggests an important role for more qualitative approaches, as well as better data.

Further research is needed to dissect how verbal and non-verbal social and racial markers (for example, speech, appearance and dress, skin colour, hair texture, religious practices) interact with aspects of identity (for example, specific ethnic origin within broad categories like ‘Black African’ and migratory history) and contingently affect specific labour market outcomes (for example, entry, wage levels, promotion) (Khattab and Hussein, 2018). Again, innovative qualitative, community-based research can support a deep dive into these dynamics.

Addressing migrant exploitation

During periods of rising unemployment and weak economic growth, it is more difficult to portray immigration as mutually beneficial for migrants, employers and the national economy than it is during economic booms (Anderson, 2010). Amidst the contentious exchanges spawned in public and policy debates, there needs to be a greater acknowledgement of aspects of immigration and asylum policies that contribute to poverty risks, indicative of policy failure.

To reiterate, the evidence base is indicative of labour-rights violations for migrant workers. While in theory migrant workers can seek legal redress, in practice it is extremely difficult for them to do so (Fudge, 2011, cited in Dias Abey and Bales, 2023). Vulnerable workers tend to lack the collective representation that can be a lubricant of rights enforcement.

According to the recent report from the PAC (PAC, 2025), when the Skilled Worker visa route was expanded in 2022, the Home Office acknowledged evidence of exploitation among migrant care workers but was slow to act (PAC, 2025). This department was reported to lack data on how many visa holders have been referred to it as potential victims of modern slavery (implying that the Home Office figures cited earlier in this review are an underestimation) (National Audit Office, 2025).

It also remains unclear whether safeguarding measures are functioning effectively for care workers affected by sponsor licence revocations. The PAC found that insufficient steps have been taken to prevent exploitation in migrants' countries of origin, including the failure to identify and address bogus agents charging unlawful

fees or making false job promises. They call for a coordinated, cross-government strategy to tackle exploitation (PAC, 2025).

The 2025 UK Immigration white paper, Restoring Control over the Immigration System (Home Office, 2025a), outlines sweeping reforms aimed at reducing net migration, tightening visa eligibility and prioritising domestic workforce development. It contains a range of provisions relating to work and skilled migration that amount to a narrowing of international recruitment pathways for less well-qualified migrants.

It also includes some proposals to crack down on abusive employers. Sponsors and migrants will face penalties for non-compliance, and it may become easier for workers to switch employers if they have taken the Skilled Worker route.& This indicates an effort to build in greater employer accountability by tying sponsorship to domestic recruitment and training efforts (Home Office, 2025a).

Nonetheless, there are other areas where the white paper and subsequent policy consultation could increase the risk of migrant exploitation, such as proposals to increase the default qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain from 5 to 10 years, and raising it to 15 years for low-skilled migrants. This will extend the time migrants are subject to NRPF, increasing risks of in-work poverty, hardship and vulnerability to exploitation.

The complex dynamics of the asylum-seeking process are not protecting people from exploitation. Between February and October 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the British Red Cross conducted UK-wide research through focus groups with professionals supporting asylum seekers,

refugees, and victims of modern slavery. They also interviewed experts and individuals with first-hand experience of the asylum system and exploitation (UNHCR and British Red Cross, 2021).

The research aimed to uncover the exploitation risks faced by refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Crucial warning signs of modern slavery and exploitation were found to be slipping through the cracks of the asylum-seeking process. At key moments, like arrival, screening and interviews, there are missed opportunities to spot and support victims. The questions meant to uncover exploitation often fail to encourage honest disclosure. The research reveals a deeper issue: many Home Office staff lack the confidence and training to handle trauma and sensitive topics, leaving vulnerable people unheard and unprotected (UNHCR and British Red Cross, 2021).

Having to wait a long time on extremely low incomes traps people in extreme hardship and can lead some into undocumented work. The Government has prioritised asylum application processing time, and wait times have begun to fall (they were much higher a couple of years ago). This is very important, as it leaves people without the right to work for less time.

Nonetheless, the consensus is that being able to work after 6 months would help protect many from severe poverty and the risk of destitution (see Dias-Abey and Bales, 2023 and Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). The UK has a more restrictive policy than can be found in many other countries (Gower et al., 2024).

4. Conclusion

The findings of this review indicate that systemic and organisational biases and discrimination within the UK job market are contributing to an increased likelihood of poverty among Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani populations. Significant inequalities exist within the workplace with respect to job quality, barriers to better-paid work and visa status.

The picture is a complex one, revealing, for example, nuances in the factors that shape labour market experience and outcomes relating to ethnic heritage, faith, gender, whether non-UK born or second generation and visa status. In engaging with this complex terrain, multiple policy interventions are needed to help foster more equitable labour market outcomes.

The persistence of long-standing, albeit evolving, disparities helps to justify moves to greater regulation. However, a strong emphasis on enforcement mechanisms is needed to foster the kind of workplace change that may make a tangible difference to the labour market outcomes of the most disadvantaged ethnic communities across the UK. As levers for change are strengthened, progress in addressing disparities needs to be monitored, supported by research, including addressing those research gaps outlined in this review.

Methodology and limitations

In developing this narrative literature review, our aim was to identify a broad scope of sources to help us understand how ethnicity, racism and the labour market interact with poverty outcomes for Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani groups, with a focus on the experience of workplace inequalities. We steered away from (systematic) literary review approaches that arbitrarily exclude studies based on citation counts or journal prestige.

For our literature search methodology, we initially performed question-based searches using AI-assisted search engines, such as Consensus and Elicit. Both rely on the open online academic publication database Semantic Scholar, which provides abstracts of published articles as well as many working papers.

This first round of literature search provided us with an initial list of potential articles. We then examined this initial longlist and identified the studies that were the most relevant to our literature review. These were, broadly speaking, studies that focused on the United Kingdom at least to a significant extent and included some data on the 3 ethnic groups in focus: Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African.

We then used this shorter list of potential studies to identify keywords and themes, before using the academic publication databases Web of Science and Scopus to check the veracity of our initial findings. Notably, our more conventional literature search did not add many sources to our collection.

Once we were satisfied that we had a list of academic studies that was sufficiently broad (although not comprehensive), we once again analysed our list to ensure that the sources were relevant to the research questions. We then produced an initial version of the literature review, and further drafts as needed.

Our grey literature search was less systematic. We relied on our knowledge of the field, alongside publications and databases. With these searches, search engines identified studies based on keyword or semantic searches. In some instances, we also used AI-aided searches, in particular ChatGPT and DeepSeek aided source identification.

Quantitative survey data relating to ethnicity and the labour market has been challenging to draw on in exploring the labour market experiences of Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities. Notably, challenges arose when trying to move from consideration of ethnicity to the experiences of specific groups and their intersectional contours.

Qualitative studies often deploy broad ethnic categorisations such as ‘ethnic minority’, ‘BAME’ or ‘BME’, or group ‘Asian’ without distinguishing Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi. There are related data issues surrounding ethnicity and small sample sizes, accentuated by recent declines in household survey responses.

The inclusion of qualitative studies and grey literature has been helpful in providing a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani communities, although as we have seen, there are significant gaps in the evidence base.

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About the authors

Dr Maria Hudson: Essex University, Senior Lecturer in organisation studies and human resource management, Essex Business School.

Dr Pasi Ahonen: Essex University, Senior Lecturer in management and marketing, Essex Business School.

Jity Bajaj: Essex University, Postgraduate Research Student, Essex Business School.

How to cite this report

If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is:

Hudson, M. Ahonen, P. Bajaj, J. (2026) Ethnicity, poverty and in-work inequalities in the UK. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.