



Inequality

The IFS Deaton Review

Social mobility and ethnicity

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Executive summary

There are well-documented ethnic inequalities in the labour market. While it has on occasion been suggested that these may stem from differences in characteristics among those of different ethnic groups – differences that can somehow explain the gaps away (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021) – others point to persistent evidence of discrimination in the UK labour market (Zwysen, Di Stasio and Heath, 2021), which itself helps shape ethnic minorities' economic position across generations (Platt, 2021). By investigating patterns of both educational and occupational intergenerational mobility across ethnic groups, this briefing note sheds greater light on how historical disadvantages are, or are not, replicated in today's education system and labour market, and the implications for targeted versus more general policies to level the playing field.

Specifically, this briefing note sets out how ethnic economic gaps open up, or do not open up, across those born and/or raised in the UK. It takes as a starting point the fact that second-generation ethnic minority children tend to grow up in poorer families, reflecting the ways that their immigrant parents are systematically disadvantaged in the labour market. Since we know that people from poorer family backgrounds tend to do worse both in education and in the labour market, this would be expected to disadvantage those from minority ethnic groups from the outset. However, second-generation ethnic minorities tend to do much better in terms of educational attainment than one would expect given those more disadvantaged origins. And yet, on moving into work, this ability to succeed in education does not bring the expected rewards. At each stage there are, nevertheless, important differences between different ethnic minority groups.

Key findings

The UK's second-generation minority ethnic groups are performing well in education, especially in terms of attainment of degree-level education. This is striking because those from ethnic minority groups born or brought up in the UK are much more likely than those from white UK backgrounds to have been disadvantaged in childhood; and we know that childhood disadvantage is in general strongly associated with poorer educational outcomes. For example, second-generation Indian, Bangladeshi and black Caribbean women from manual class origins are over 20 percentage points more likely to attain tertiary qualifications than their white British peers from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds, and Indian and Bangladeshi men are over 30 percentage points more likely to do so. Overall, over 50% of second-generation Indians, 35% of second-generation Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, but only 26% of their white majority comparators have tertiary qualifications. Ethnic minorities thus perform well in education despite disadvantaged family origins rather than performing less well as a result of such disadvantage. The latter pattern has been noted extensively outside the UK, making the UK experience distinctive.

Employment disadvantage of minority ethnic groups still, however, persists. Men and women from most ethnic minority groups have lower employment rates among those economically active than their white majority counterparts. This disadvantage is reduced but not eliminated when we account for disadvantaged family origins. For example, taking account of social class origins, the employment gap for second-generation Pakistani men reduces from around 4 percentage points to around 1 percentage point, and for Pakistani women from around 5 percentage points to around 2 percentage points. This would suggest some of the employment gap is driven by the disadvantages faced by their parents that persist across generations and are reduced but not eliminated by educational success.

For those in work, education does offer a route to attaining a higher social class for some minority groups. Indian and Bangladeshi men and Indian and Caribbean women achieve considerably greater levels of occupational success than their disadvantaged family origins might suggest. But this is not the case for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, despite the fact that they are successful in education. For example, second-generation Pakistani and Bangladeshi women have around 5 percentage point lower probabilities of ending up in professional or managerial occupations than their similarly qualified white British comparators. These different patterns of social mobility suggest that efforts to improve social mobility in general will not benefit all groups equally.

1. Introduction

There are well-documented ethnic inequalities in the labour market. While it has on occasion been suggested that these may stem from differences in characteristics among those of different ethnic groups – differences that can somehow explain the gaps away (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021) – others point to persistent evidence of discrimination in the UK labour market (Zwysen, Di Stasio and Heath, 2021), which itself helps shape ethnic minorities' economic position across generations (Platt, 2021). By investigating patterns of both educational and occupational intergenerational mobility across ethnic groups, this briefing note sheds greater light on how historical disadvantages are, or are not, replicated in today's education system and labour market, and the implications for targeted versus more general policies to level the playing field.¹

Given the well-documented disadvantage on immigration faced by the parents of today's second-generation minorities born and/or raised in the UK, we ask 'Do contemporary inequalities reflect the legacy of that past disadvantage?'. If this were the case, addressing barriers to social mobility in general might, in time, be expected to also address ethnic inequalities that stem from these unequal 'starting points'. Alternatively, does family background differ in its influence on educational, employment or occupational success across ethnic groups? If so, this would suggest that policies need to focus on the specific factors that promote or hinder economic success of different groups, and that attempts to level the playing field in general will be insufficient to equalise outcomes.

There is now a wealth of literature illustrating the labour market disadvantages faced by minority ethnic groups not only in the UK but across Europe (for example, Heath and Cheung (2007) and Alba and Foner (2015)). However, increasingly, sociological research has drawn attention to the fact that part of this disadvantage – this 'ethnic penalty' – may be due not solely to contemporary discrimination or other factors associated with minority ethnicity, but may be due to the overwhelmingly disadvantaged social origins of minority groups, and the historical processes which have driven these. That is, we know that less advantaged social origins – or 'lower social class' background – are clearly associated with poorer educational and labour market outcomes for the population as a whole (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2013). The vast literature on social mobility has drawn attention to this fact and to the persistence of the relevance of social origins for adult outcomes up to the present (Breen and Luijkx, 2004; Bukodi et al., 2020). We might therefore reasonably expect those minorities who come from lower social class origins to fare less well in both education and the labour market at least partly as a result of these origins. This insight (Platt, 2005a and 2005b) has led to a number of studies that incorporate social origins into evaluations of educational and occupational outcomes. These have shown that family social background can explain at least some of the educational and occupational disadvantage faced by minority groups, even if it typically still leaves some part of those inequalities unaccounted for (for example, Levels and Dronkers (2008), Gracia, Vázquez-Quesada and Van de Werfhorst (2016) and Li and Heath (2016)). In addition, findings suggest that patterns of both occupational and educational mobility vary across ethnic groups. This suggests that the role of historical disadvantage following immigration as represented by the family social background of the second generation may be insufficient to account for contemporary ethnic inequalities. It also

¹ The Deaton Review will contain a detailed study of racial and ethnic inequalities across a much broader range of areas and covering more minority groups, that will address the drivers of difference more specifically, including the historical position of the different minority ethnic groups in the UK. This briefing note focuses just on the topic of social mobility and only those groups for whom such mobility can be reliably assessed.

implies that we may need to revisit assumptions about what underpins the relationship between social origins and educational and occupational outcomes in general.

In this briefing note, we therefore ask:

- How far do educational and labour market outcomes of second-generation ethnic minority groups stem from disadvantaged economic backgrounds? Does this differ across ethnic groups?
- Does family background play a more or less important role in educational outcomes than in labour market outcomes for minorities compared with the majority?
- Given the importance of family background or ‘social origins’ in accounting for both differences in educational attainment and differences in labour market attainment across the population as a whole, how do we understand the different roles that family background plays across ethnic groups?

We concentrate on four minority ethnic groups – Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and black Caribbean – and compare them with the white British majority population. We focus on these groups because we have sufficient numbers for analysis and the groups are sufficiently long-standing in the UK that we can track the second generations well into adulthood.² We focus on the second-generation children of immigrants from the four minority ethnic groups – that is, those born and/or raised from a young age in the UK, but whose parents were born abroad and moved to the UK as adults – from when they were living with their parents in childhood to when they were adults of working age and after completion of education. The focus on the second generation means that they have grown up in a similar context and gone through the same school system as their white British majority peers with whom we compare them.

We use a unique source of data, the ONS Longitudinal Study for England and Wales (ONS-LS), a data set that links census records for a 1% sample of the population of England and Wales across five successive censuses (1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011). How far the findings presented here persist into the current decade can be further understood with future analysis of the 2021 decennial census.

² The black African group, for example, has insufficient numbers to track into adulthood, given that the main migration from African countries was later than for other groups. Chinese migration has similarly increased more recently, while the longer-standing second-generation Chinese migrant population is too numerically small to facilitate analysis.

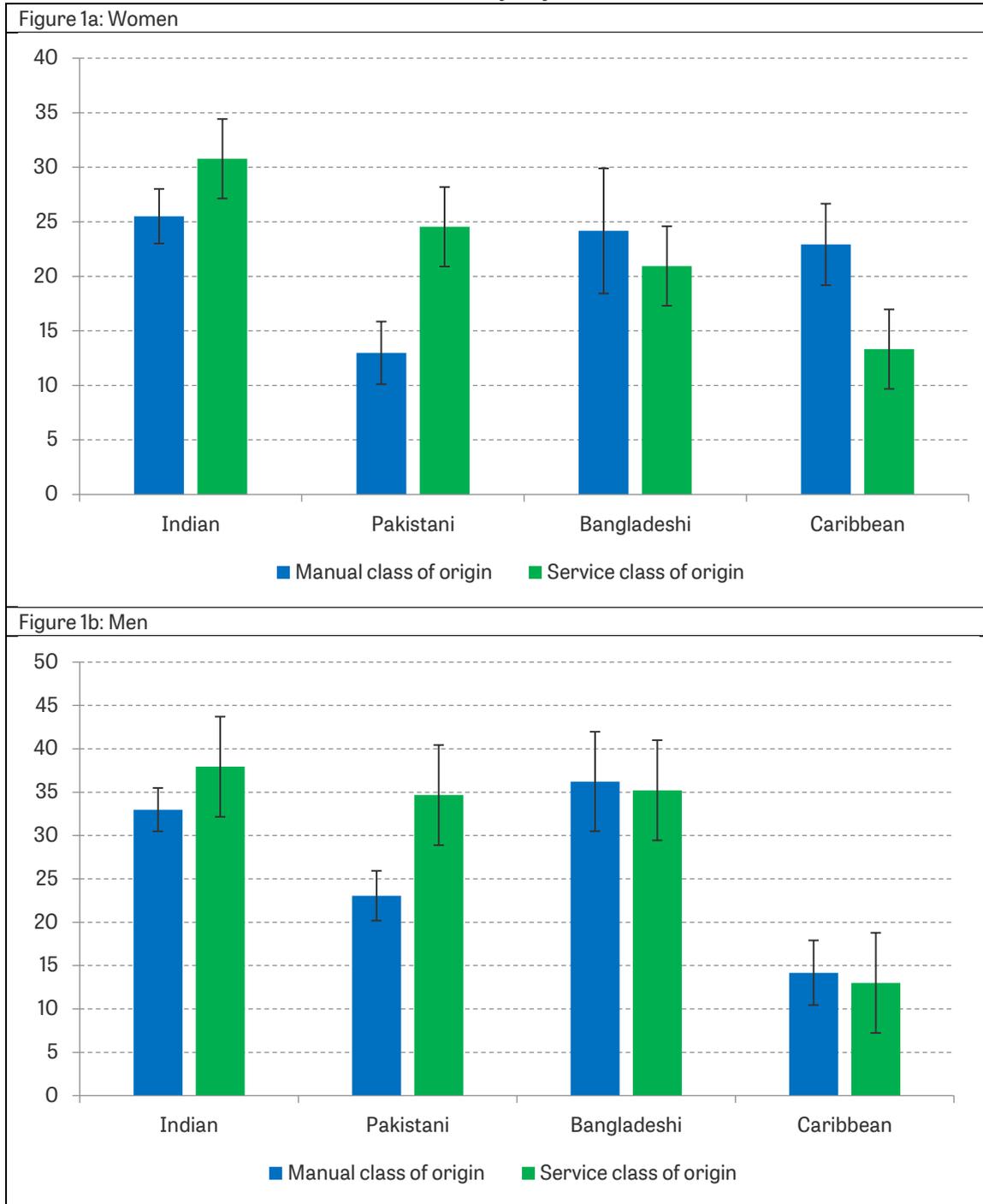
2. Educational and occupational attainment of the UK's ethnic groups

Educational attainment across ethnic groups

Many authors have noted differences in educational ambition among minorities compared with majorities (for example, Kao and Tienda (1998) and Strand (2014)). This has often been represented as a paradox, to the extent that ambitions can be out of line with attainment. However, some studies for the UK have shown that these ambitions in fact enable students to persist – and ultimately progress – in education. Unlike their white majority counterparts, ethnic minorities do not tend to adjust their expectations of, for example, higher education even if grades are somewhat lower than would normally be expected for continuing (Strand, 2014; Fernández-Reino, 2016). As a result, some authors, paralleling the social class literature with its distinction between primary (attainment) and secondary (choice of track or staying on) effects of social class (Sewell, Haller and Portes, 1969), have made the distinction between primary and secondary ethnic effects (Jackson, Jonsson and Rudolphi, 2012; Jackson, 2012). That is, primary ethnic effects are the extent to which grades differ between minorities and majority, and secondary ethnic effects are the extent to which motivations and choices differ – with motivation typically being higher among minority groups.

The picture in the UK differs from many contexts in that many minority ethnic groups are now performing better than majority groups and across different educational levels (see, for example, Crawford et al. (2011), Strand (2011) and Crawford and Greaves (2015)). In addition, for most minority groups, educational outcomes are relatively insensitive to whether they come from more or less deprived origins, particularly compared with the large social class gaps among majority group youth. This is key in the context of understanding ethnic differences, since only 16% of Indian, 7% of Pakistani, 5% of Bangladeshi and 14% of Caribbean second-generation ethnic minorities who had reached adulthood by 2011 came from more advantaged origins, compared with 29% for the white British. But adjusting for those social origins does not so much help to explain 'deficits' resulting from disadvantaged origins as to demonstrate positive attainment despite origins (Burgess, 2014; Zuccotti and Platt, 2021). This is illustrated in Figure 1 for an adult population across the four second-generation ethnic minority groups considered in this briefing note, compared with the white majority. The figure shows that the chances of having attained a university degree by ages 20–45 are higher across both manual and advantaged (service class) origins for the minority groups compared with the majority, and for both women and men. While those from more privileged origins also perform well compared with those of more disadvantaged origins within most groups, the shares of those from privileged origins are rather small for most of the minority groups from these cohorts (between around 5% and 16%). Focusing therefore on those coming from manual origins, and adjusting for other aspects of social origins, including level of neighbourhood deprivation when growing up, we can see, for example, that Indian, Bangladeshi and Caribbean second-generation women are over 20 percentage points more likely to attain tertiary qualifications than their white British peers, and that Indian and Bangladeshi second-generation men are over 30 percentage points more likely to do so. For Indian and Bangladeshi second-generation men and for Indian second-generation women, in fact, those from lower social class origins are achieving tertiary qualifications at higher rates than their white British peers from advantaged occupational origins.

Figure 1. Attainment of university degree by parental social class among second-generation ethnic minorities, relative to the white British majority



Note: Population is individuals between 20 and 45 years old. Figures are percentage point differences compared with the white majority, controlling for age, origin and destination years (i.e. the year childhood family circumstances and parental social class were measured, and the year the respondent's own occupational outcomes were measured), number of census points, parental social class, housing tenure, number of cars, number of persons per room and neighbourhood deprivation, measured when the individual was between 0 and 15 years old, computed as average marginal effects from a logit regression. The error bars are 90% confidence intervals.

Source: Adapted from figure 3 of Zuccotti and Platt (2021), from the ONS Longitudinal Study.

These findings can in part be attributed to the higher levels of commitment and motivation found in other sources among minority groups, even with more disadvantaged origins, compared with majority groups. But they also demonstrate that social class – which has, in the literature, been closely associated with educational choices – does not work in the same way for minorities as it does for the majority. That is, what disadvantaged social origins are typically understood to represent – whether attachment to education, the enabling or restricting features of home environment for educational success, the social networks that promote educational attainment, the resources that facilitate educational attainment etc. – cannot be read across ethnic groups in the same way.

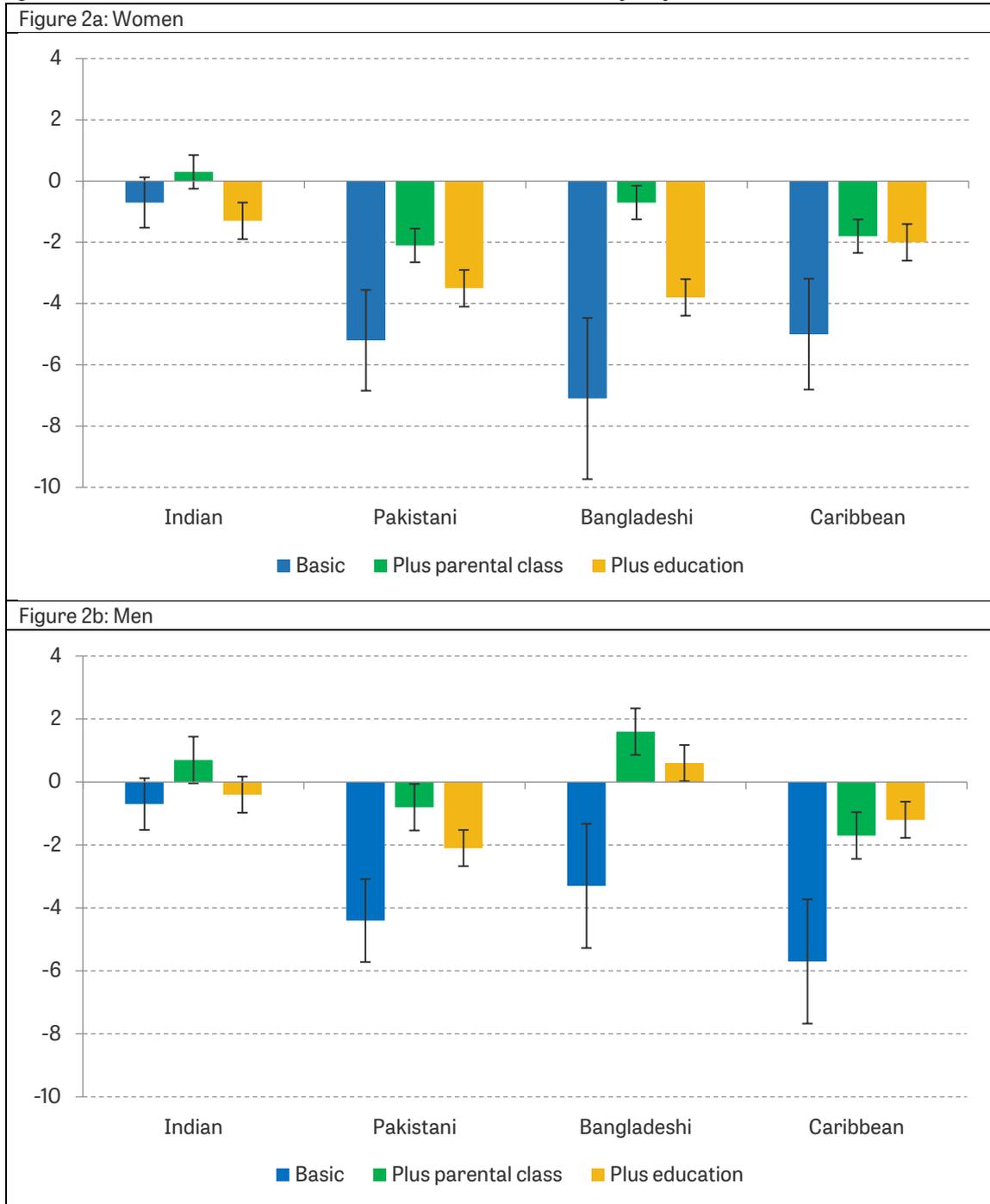
Labour market outcomes across ethnic groups

Turning to labour market outcomes, as noted above, research on occupational outcomes has, by including social class origins, enhanced the ability of analyses to explain differences in labour market outcomes across groups (Platt, 2005a; Gracia, Vázquez-Quesada and Van de Werfhorst, 2016; Li and Heath, 2016). That is, recognising that ethnic inequalities may derive from disadvantaged social origins has accounted for some if not all of the 'ethnic penalties' in the labour market that are found when similarly educated minorities are compared with their majority peers. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in employment probabilities of minorities compared with the majority among the economically active. That is, it shows the extent to which minorities are more likely to be unemployed (lower employment probabilities). It illustrates that the major gaps in employment for second-generation minorities compared with their white majority counterparts (the first bar) are substantially reduced when social background is factored in (the second bar). For example, taking account of social class origins, the employment gap for second-generation Pakistani men reduces from around 4 percentage points to around 1 percentage point, and for Pakistani women from around 5 percentage points to around 2 percentage points.

At the same time, there are substantial differences in the extent of (upward) social mobility by social origins – that is, movement from lower social class parental background to a professional or managerial occupation oneself. Rather than ethnic minorities being more likely to be held back by disadvantaged origins, an increasing number of UK studies now demonstrate that upward social (occupational) mobility from more disadvantaged social class origins is greater for many ethnic minority groups than it is for the majority (Platt, 2005a and 2005b; Zuccotti, 2015; Zuccotti and Platt, 2021). We can see this in the second bar of Figure 3, which is positive in most cases, indicating greater upward mobility for minorities than for the majority. Adjusting for social origins, but without taking account of educational attainment, second-generation Indian and Caribbean women are over 10 percentage points more likely to be in a professional or managerial occupation than their white British peers, while Indian and Bangladeshi men are over 20 percentage points more likely to end up in such roles.

That means that, on the one hand, social origins offer some explanatory potential for understanding the poorer employment outcomes of minority groups. On the other hand, the meaning of those origins appears to differ across groups in that, for both education and occupational success, lower social class origins do not hold minorities back in the same way as they do for the majority.

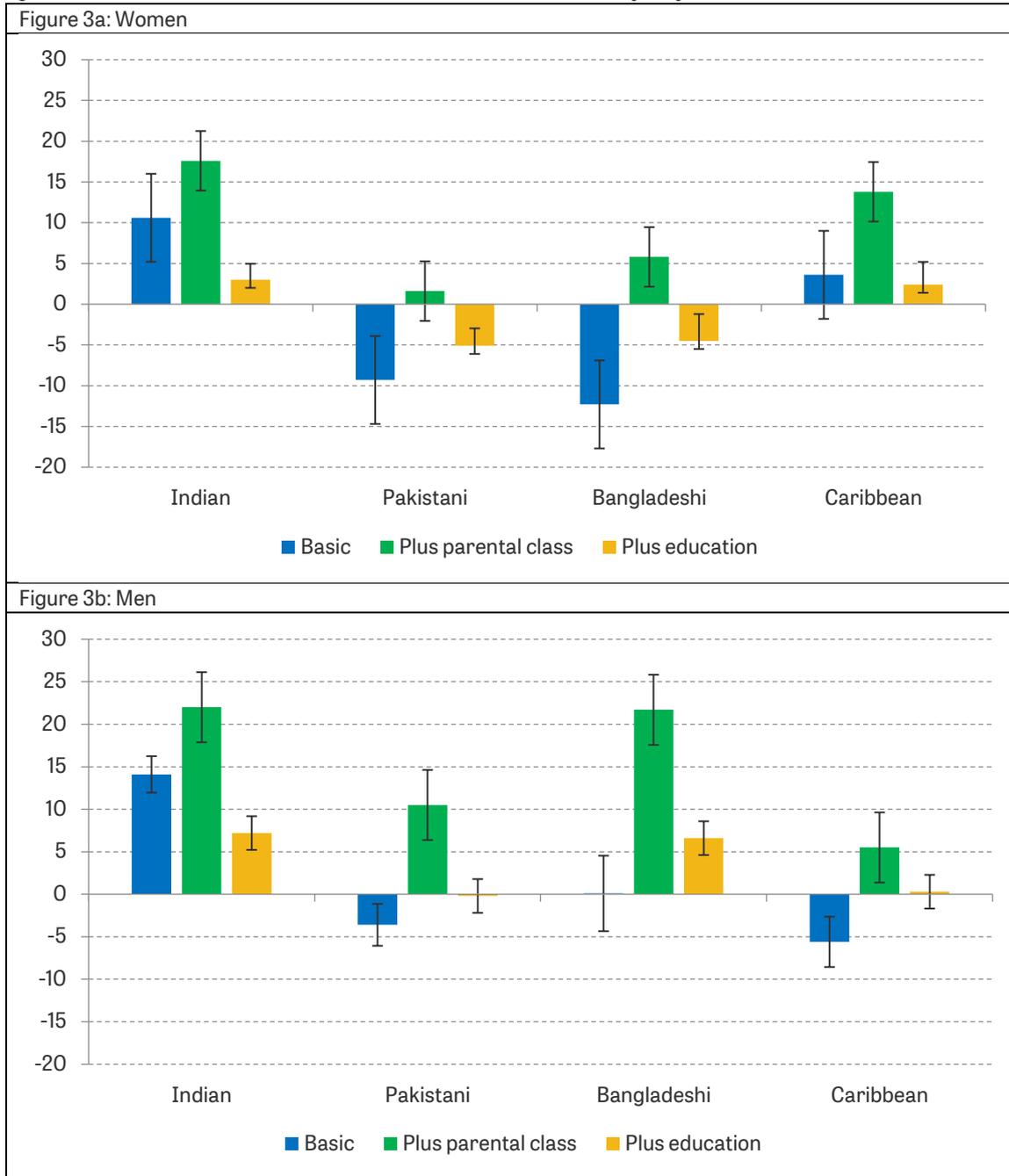
Figure 2. Employment rates of those economically active by ethnic group among second-generation ethnic minorities, relative to the white British majority



Note: Population is individuals between 20 and 45 years old. Figures are percentage point differences compared with the white majority, computed as average marginal effects from a logit regression controlling for age, origin and destination years, number of census points ('Basic'), plus parental social class, housing tenure, number of cars, number of persons per room and neighbourhood deprivation, measured when the individual was between 0 and 15 years old ('Plus parental class') and own educational qualifications and family composition ('Plus education'). The error bars are 90% confidence intervals.

Source: Adapted from tables 2 and 3 of Zuccotti and Platt (2021), analysis of the ONS Longitudinal Study.

Figure 3. Attainment of professional or managerial occupational class outcomes among second-generation ethnic minorities, relative to the white British majority



Note: Population is individuals between 20 and 45 years old. Figures are percentage point differences compared with the white majority, computed as average marginal effects from a logit regression controlling for age, origin and destination years, number of census points ('Basic'), plus parental social class, housing tenure, number of cars, number of persons per room and neighbourhood deprivation, measured when the individual was between 0 and 15 years old ('Plus parental class') and own educational qualifications and family composition ('Plus education'). The error bars are 90% confidence intervals.

Source: Adapted from tables 2 and 3 of Zuccotti and Platt (2021), analysis of the ONS Longitudinal Study.

Part of the reason for occupational success of the minority groups is their success in education shown in Figure 1 and the well-known fact that education positively affects labour market outcomes. Adjusting additionally for educational attainment (the third bar in Figures 2 and 3) shows that the reduction of employment penalties or the greater upward mobility is achieved through education (compare Platt (2005b)). This means that when outcomes are adjusted for education, the reductions in employment penalties are no longer so pronounced. The employment gaps for second-generation Pakistani men and women are around 2 and 3 percentage points respectively, compared with white British with comparable social origins and educational qualifications. Similarly, the greater levels of upward mobility are attenuated across groups when educational attainment is factored in. In particular, it is observed that once education is taken into account, some groups (ethnic minority women especially) do less well than one might expect, given their educational attainment, even after adjusting for social origins. For example, second-generation Pakistani and Bangladeshi women have around 5 percentage point lower probabilities of ending up in professional or managerial occupations than their similarly qualified white British comparators.³

In summary, when it comes to measures of occupational success, the ethnic minority groups studied here appear to do at least as well as – or, in the case of Indian and Bangladeshi men and Indian and Caribbean women, considerably better than – their white majority counterparts from similar family backgrounds. The story for employment rates is more mixed – even controlling for family background, we do see employment gaps for some ethnic minorities. And we see clear deficits among ethnic minorities if we do not control for family background. While this reflects the important reality that more disadvantaged backgrounds are typically relevant for labour market success, it fits less well with the findings that minorities achieve relative educational success even from disadvantaged backgrounds. We see consistently that the second-generation ethnic minority groups are more upwardly mobile from more disadvantaged origins than their white British counterparts; but they are less upwardly mobile than one would expect given their very high levels of educational attainment.

³ It has been posited that ethnic minorities end up with a different ‘market value’ of qualifications (Richardson, 2008 and 2015). Ethnic minorities are more likely to go to less prestigious universities (Shiner and Noden, 2015; Britton, Dearden and Waltmann, 2021) and have a higher rejection rate from these (Boliver, 2013). Degree-level success may therefore be less salient for the job market for (some) minorities than for their majority peers, even if they are attaining tertiary qualifications at higher rates. However, much of that difference in university selection can itself be accounted for by social class background (Shiner and Noden, 2015). At the same time, analysis of early labour market outcomes among graduates indicates that even though degree choice and institution differ across ethnic groups, they have relatively little explanatory power in relation to recent graduates’ labour market experience (Zwysen and Longhi, 2018; Britton, Dearden and Waltmann, 2021). If anything, subject choice seems to work in the opposite direction: ethnic minorities are actually more likely to study subjects that normally bring higher earnings returns (Britton, Dearden and Waltmann, 2021).

3. Conclusions

In this briefing note, we set out to address the following questions:

- How far do educational and labour market outcomes of second-generation ethnic minority groups stem from disadvantaged economic backgrounds? Does this differ across ethnic groups?
- Does family background play a more or less important role in educational outcomes than in labour market outcomes for minorities compared with the majority?
- Given the importance of family background or 'social origins' in accounting for both differences in educational attainment and differences in labour market attainment across the population as a whole, how do we understand the different roles that family background plays across ethnic groups?

We showed that the UK's minority ethnic groups who grew up in the UK and who we can now observe in adult life are achieving high levels of degree qualifications, regardless of their social class origins. While there is some variation in the extent of this educational outperformance across minority groups, it is the case to a greater or lesser extent for all four minority groups considered and for both men and women. Despite their immigrant parents being heavily concentrated in more disadvantaged economic circumstances, working-age UK-born ethnic minorities are therefore outperforming their white British counterparts from equivalent social origins. Indeed, for Indian and Bangladeshi second-generation men and for Indian second-generation women, those from lower social class origins are achieving tertiary qualifications at higher rates than their white British peers from advantaged occupational origins. These findings overall suggest that those from minority ethnic groups possess additional qualities or resources not reflected by their observed social class origins, assets that would also be expected to favour them in the labour market.

However, when we considered the labour market, we found a less clear picture. Minorities face barriers in access to employment; and even while those in work achieve some occupational success, this is not consistently in line with their educational performance. To the extent that there is occupational success, it is achieved through education and compared with those of the same social class origins. However, this does not account for the fact that those educational successes were themselves achieved 'against the odds', given how strongly educational attainment is shaped by family background in general. This introduces a paradox. If we interpret the sorts of factors embedded in 'class origins' that influence differential educational outcomes as being the same as those that influence labour market outcomes (cultural and social capital, non-cognitive skills, etc.), this raises the question of why we should expect labour market outcomes to be comparable to those of the majority group of the same social class background, when educational outcomes are not held back by disadvantaged origins. That is, why would we expect family background to 'explain' labour market disadvantage of minority ethnic groups, when there is so much educational mobility?

Relatedly, the findings also suggest that our understanding of ethnic labour market disadvantage via estimating the presence or absence of 'ethnic penalties' (Heath and Cheung, 2007) might actually disguise more complex social reproduction processes and inequalities. If adjusting for

education and social background results in a zero ethnic penalty, this cannot necessarily be interpreted as equality. Some ethnic minority groups may still not be achieving their full potential, if they have attained in education despite their social class background and yet the zero penalty is found only when we adjust for social class.

Of course, one obvious answer is that there is discrimination within the labour market (Zwysen, Di Stasio and Heath, 2021) but less so in education. But that leaves us with remaining questions about how educational mobility is achieved, given that the international literature indicates that aspirations on their own are no recipe for success, and the educational system is not free of discrimination (Mirza, 2018). The findings also invite further reflection on the processes that suppress social mobility even in the face of educational mobility and why these differ for men and women of the same ethnicity. That is, by observing different patterns of social class mobility across groups, we may be able to identify more specifically under what conditions disadvantaged origins do and do not limit attainment.

Overall, our findings reveal both the extent of and the constraints on social mobility, and how that differs across ethnic groups. These findings can also potentially shed light on how we understand the role and meaning of social class origins in social mobility. If it is clear that for some groups social class origins do not negatively impact educational attainment – and that leads to greater consequent chances of occupational success – we may have lessons to learn about the factors enhancing educational outcomes for all. But if educational attainment does not equalise access to employment and only brings occupational success for some groups, it is clear that improving social mobility in general will not impact these labour market inequalities. A more targeted approach may be needed to ensure the great gains made in education are capitalised on for the benefit of individuals – and also society.

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