

Decomposing ethnic gaps in women’s labour force participation: evidence from the UK

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Abstract

Despite substantial increases in women’s labour force participation in the UK, large disparities remain across ethnic groups. This article examines the sources of these gaps, assessing the relative importance of individual, household, structural, and cultural factors. Beyond the well-established role of human capital, we find that integration-related factors, household composition, family structure, and gender norms play a significant role, particularly for South Asian women. In contrast, over and above structural elements, more egalitarian gender attitudes help explain higher participation among Caribbean women. We also find that the influence of gender norms varies depending on economic constraints. These findings emphasize the need for targeted, group-specific policies to reduce persistent ethnic gaps in women’s employment and promote more inclusive labour markets. By focusing on participation as the first barrier, the article sheds light on the entry point for ethnic minority women, informing future research and policy on broader labour market inequalities.

Keywords ethnicity, female, labour force participation, gender norms, Gelbach decomposition

JEL classifications J15, J16, J21

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, women’s labour force participation (LFP) in the UK has risen substantially. In 1971, only 55% of women were economically active—either working or seeking work—whereas by 2024 this figure had increased to around 75%. Despite this aggregate progress, women’s labour market participation continues to differ markedly across ethnic groups. While around 77% of White British women are economically active, participation rates range from 78% among Indian women to just 52% among Bangladeshi women (ONS 2024). Understanding the sources of these differences remains both an important empirical

question and a pressing policy challenge, as ethnic disparities in labour market outcomes have significant implications for women's economic independence, social and cultural integration, and for promoting greater gender and ethnic equality and social cohesion across society (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparity 2021). This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the determinants of ethnic gaps in women's LFP in the UK, identifying which factors contribute most to these differences.

We make several contributions to the literature. First, we extend the large decomposition literature on ethnic gaps in women's labour market outcomes. Most existing decomposition studies focus on ethnic wage differentials, typically using traditional approaches such as the Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition. Moreover, because of sample selection issues for women, arising from their non-random selection into employment and the difficulty of identifying credible exclusion restrictions for Heckman-type selection models, this literature has largely concentrated on ethnic wage differences among men (Elliott and Lindley 2008; Longhi et al. 2013; Miranda and Zhu 2013; Ochmann 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights into ethnic wage disparities, far less is known about the mechanisms underlying ethnic gaps at the 'first hurdle' for women, namely their participation in the labour force. By focusing on LFP, our analysis addresses an outcome that is a prerequisite for earnings, economic autonomy, and longer-term labour market trajectories.

Second, within the relatively limited decomposition literature on women's LFP, we adopt a decomposition method that is more appropriate and informative for understanding the drivers of observed ethnic gaps. Existing studies decomposing ethnic differences in women's LFP in the UK have generally relied on approaches that separate explained and unexplained components but do not allow for a clear assessment of the relative contribution of different explanatory factors (Dale et al. 2006; Dustmann and Theodoropoulos 2010). To address this limitation, and in line with more recent work on ethnic inequalities (Burn et al. 2024, Ochmann 2024, Ochmann et al. 2025), we apply Gelbach's (2016) decomposition method. This approach is well suited to participation outcomes and enables us to quantify how much each group of covariates contributes to the overall 'explained' ethnic gap in LFP, without relying on an arbitrary ordering of controls. As a result, we move beyond asking whether particular determinants matter and instead identify which mechanisms are most influential in explaining observed participation gaps.

Third, we provide new and more recent evidence using a much richer set of explanatory variables than is typically considered in the literature. Building on earlier studies that emphasize the role of education and family formation (Dale et al. 2006; Algan et al. 2010), we draw on a broader range of factors capturing integration into the host country, household resources, partner characteristics, and proxies for generational and intergenerational influences. These include measures such as English proficiency, age at arrival, household income, partner's education and employment status, and birth cohorts potentially reflecting different migration histories, and respondents' mothers' employment status. By bringing these dimensions together within a single framework, we capture a wider set of structural and social barriers shaping ethnic differences in women's LFP.

Fourth, we contribute to recent work stressing the role of traditional gender norms and culture, as well as their interaction with structural constraints, in affecting women's labour supply across ethnic groups (Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015; Zuccotti 2015; Koopmans 2016; Khoudja and Platt 2018). We explicitly account for gender role attitudes using direct measures of norms and examine how their association with LFP varies with both contemporary household resources and parental socioeconomic background. By modelling interactions between gender norms, household resources, and parental socioeconomic status, we assess

whether lower participation among some ethnic minority women reflects cultural preferences, structural constraints, or the interaction of the two.

To conduct this analysis, we use data from the Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) (University of Essex 2023), focusing on women from the five largest ethnic minority groups in the UK—Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Caribbean, and Other Black. We estimate linear probability models of LFP and apply [Gelbach's \(2016\)](#) decomposition to quantify the contribution of different explanatory factors to ethnic participation gaps relative to White British women.

Our findings illustrate the importance of moving beyond human capital explanations to account for structural and cultural elements when addressing ethnic disparities in women's LFP. Additional components, such as integration into the host country, household composition, and gender norms, play a critical role, with substantial heterogeneity across ethnic groups. For South Asian women, age at arrival, the presence of young children, and traditional gender role attitudes emerge as key barriers, though their relative importance differs across Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi women. In contrast, Caribbean women's stronger labour market engagement is partly explained by more progressive gender attitudes and higher levels of educational attainment, as well as a long-standing tradition of economic activity. We also find suggestive evidence on the interactions between structural and cultural factors. For instance, while more traditional gender norms are associated with lower LFP across all ethnic groups, this negative association is stronger at higher levels of household income. This pattern suggests that the extent to which gender norms translate into non-participation may depend on economic context: when household resources are limited, economic necessity constrains the ability to act on restrictive norms, whereas when resources are more abundant, norms are more likely to bind. Overall, our results point to the need for targeted, group-specific policy interventions to reduce persistent ethnic gaps in women's economic participation.

2. Ethnic groups and labour force participation

The ethnic groups in the UK are highly diverse, each with distinct migration histories. Migration from non-European countries, particularly from former colonies in the Caribbean, South Asia, and Africa, has played a significant role in shaping UK's demography. The timing and motivations for migration have varied considerably across these groups. For example, Black Caribbean women migrated to the UK in the 1950s and early 1960s as economic migrants, filling labour shortages that the existing workforce could not meet, including the expansion of the post-war National Health Service. Black African migrants are a diverse group including highly educated students, refugees, and those who migrated for family reunification. South Asian women, on the other hand, primarily arrived in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly for family reunification ([Dale et al. 2006](#)). These differences in the timing of migration and the characteristics of migrants have led to varied patterns of settlement, family structure, and, eventually, distinct labour market outcomes among major ethnic minority groups in the UK ([Mirza and Warwick 2024](#)).

A range of factors have been identified to explain the LFP of ethnic minority women and the gap in LFP compared to majority women. Traditionally, education is widely recognized as the most critical element, playing a central role in the integration of ethnic minority women into the labour market. However, within the UK context, differences in educational attainment across ethnic groups only partially explain the LFP gap. The ethnic gap persists even after controlling for education, despite significant improvements in the qualifications of

minority women over generations (Lindley et al. 2006; Zuccotti and Platt 2023; Nandi and Platt 2024).

Moreover, key factors such as household composition, available resources, caregiving responsibilities, household specialization, and gendered normative expectations which position women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners vary significantly across ethnic minority groups. For example, South Asian women are more likely to be married, have more children, and live in households with intergenerational co-residence (ONS 2023). By contrast, Caribbean and Black African women are more often single parents (Nandi and Platt 2010). Previous research shows that having a partner is associated with lower LFP among Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian women in the UK, whereas it is linked to higher participation among White British and Black Caribbean women (Holdsworth and Dale 1997; Mirza and Warwick 2024). While motherhood is a key determinant of LFP for White British women, it appears to have less impact on Bangladeshi and Pakistani women; possibly because their decision not to work is often made at the point of marriage rather than childbirth. For Black Caribbean women, LFP and motherhood patterns are shaped by their history of economic migration and by cultural expectations that embrace both earning and caregiving roles (Dale et al. 2006; Khoudja and Platt 2018).

There may also be additional barriers to LFP of ethnic minority women, such as limited English proficiency, restricted social networks, and unfamiliarity with the UK labour market, particularly among those born abroad. Research underscores the importance of generational differences in LFP. For example, first-generation immigrant women are more likely to be affected by limited language skills and restrictive visa conditions, both of which constrain job opportunities and contribute to the participation gaps relative to native women (Dustmann and Fabbri 2003; Nandi and Platt 2024). Research also emphasizes the lasting impact of ‘age at arrival’ on the socioeconomic assimilation of childhood immigrants (those arriving before age 18), affecting educational attainment, employment status, earnings, occupational level, and reliance on social welfare in adulthood (Hermansen 2017). In contrast, second-generation immigrants are more likely to form inter-ethnic ties with the majority population, which can lead to improved labour market outcomes. These connections often facilitate access to information about job opportunities and help develop key skills needed for successful job applications (Koopmans 2016).¹

Despite accounting for the abovementioned key determinants of women’s LFP, unexplained ethnic differences in LFP persist between ethnic minority and majority women (Khoudja and Platt 2018; Mirza and Warwick 2024). While this remaining gap is often attributed to cultural values and social norms that reinforce traditional gender roles and divisions of labour, relatively few studies have empirically examined their contribution. Ethnic minority women, socialized in different family structures and social networks, may develop varying attitudes toward traditional gender roles. Research on second-generation immigrants, who arguably experience similar economic and institutional conditions as natives while maintaining distinct cultural values inherited from their foreign-born parents, demonstrates that cultural norms from the country of origin significantly influence immigrant women’s LFP and integration into host country’s institutions (Fernández 2007; Fernández and Fogli 2009; Blau et al. 2013; Huber and Paule-Paludkiewicz 2024). Women originating from countries with strong traditional gender roles generally exhibit lower LFP, highlighting the role of social pressure and conformity in shaping labour market outcomes.

¹ Putnam (2007) distinguishes between ‘bonding’ ties within one’s own ethnic group and ‘bridging’ ties with members of other ethnic groups, particularly the majority group. Bridging ties are especially important for minorities, as they are more likely to provide valuable information about dominant cultural norms and codes.

Recent efforts explicitly examining ethnic differences in women's LFP incorporate measures of social norms, beliefs, gender role attitudes, and religiosity alongside established determinants (for evidence from the Netherlands and Europe, see [Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015](#), and [Koopmans 2016](#)). In the UK, [Khoudja and Platt \(2018\)](#) is the only study to analyse how gender norms, specifically traditional attitudes and religiosity, affect ethnic minority women's labour market entry and exit. Using earlier waves of UKHLS, they focus on how life events (e.g. childbirth, partnership and income changes) shape labour market transitions. Their findings show that traditional gender norms partly explain lower entry and higher exit rates among Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, while religiosity has no consistent effect.² Our work has a broader focus on overall LFP. Instead of short-term changes and time-varying factors, we consider long-term determinants like education, immigration status, or maternal employment.

Finally, a large literature emphasizes the importance of accounting for socioeconomic background when estimating ethnic penalties ([Zuccotti 2015](#); [Li and Heath 2016](#)). Ethnic minority groups are, on average, more likely than majority populations to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, typically measured by parental socioeconomic status (SES). This literature stresses the complex interplay between SES origins, household resources, ethnicity, and gender role attitudes in shaping educational and labour market outcomes ([Strand 2014](#); [Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015](#); [Zuccotti 2015](#); [Weisshaar and Cabello-Hutt 2020](#); [Zuccotti and Platt 2023](#)), although this is difficult to identify empirically. Some studies model this using interaction terms between SES, ethnicity, and gender role attitudes, but these effects, especially for labour market outcomes, are often statistically insignificant, potentially due to limited sample sizes ([Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015](#); [Weisshaar and Cabello-Hutt 2020](#)).

We build on the existing literature by integrating a comprehensive set of individual and household characteristics, alongside proxies for structural and cultural constraints, within a unified analytical framework to better explain ethnic gaps in women's LFP. To evaluate the relative importance of these factors, we apply Gelbach's decomposition method, which overcomes limitations associated with sequential model building. By combining a rich set of controls with a robust decomposition strategy, we aim to provide clearer evidence on the mechanisms influencing ethnic disparities in women's LFP and generate insights relevant for policy interventions.

3. Data and empirical model

We use data from three UKHLS waves—2 (2010–12), 4 (2012–14), and 10 (2018–20)—the waves that include questions on gender norms. Across these three waves, all women aged 16 to 65 are included. We exclude women who are in full-time education or report themselves to be long-term sick or disabled; we also exclude all non-British White women. Additional exclusions from the sample are applied only to women with missing data on the variables of interest.

² Religion's impact on ethnic differences in women's LFP is difficult to disentangle from ethnicity and gender role attitudes. Religiosity, rather than religious affiliation, is linked to traditional gender norms ([Brinkerhoff and MacKie 1985](#); [Khoudja and Platt 2018](#)), and this effect is weaker among second-generation immigrants ([Georgiadis and Manning 2011](#); [Scheible and Fleischmann 2013](#)), which may explain the weak or statistically insignificant association between religiosity and women's LFP in immigrant groups ([Fleischmann and Phalet 2012](#); [Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015](#)). Given the challenges of disentangling ethnicity and religion for major UK ethnic groups, and the mixed evidence on religion's impact, we exclude religion and religiosity from our analysis.

3.1 Empirical model

To estimate the ethnic differences in LFP, we start by estimating the following linear specification:

$$Y_i = \alpha_1 + \beta^{uc} ED_i + e_i \quad (1)$$

where Y_i is the LFP of woman i , ($i = 1, \dots, n$); ED_i is the ethnicity dummy, with White British as the base category; e_i is the idiosyncratic error term; α_1 and β^{uc} are parameters to be estimated. We next estimate a specification with a full set of covariates:

$$Y_i = \alpha_2 + \beta^c ED_i + \sum_j \gamma_j X_{ij} + u_i \quad (2)$$

where X_{ij} are a full set of covariates that influence a woman's decision to enter the labour market, $j = 1, \dots, J$; u_i is the idiosyncratic error term; and α_2 , β^c , and γ_j are the parameters of interest. Equations (1) and (2) are estimated using a linear probability model with data pooled from the three UKHLS waves. Both equations are estimated separately for each ethnic group, in each case comparing the minority women to the same sample of White British women. Since we pool multiple waves of a longitudinal dataset, some individuals may appear multiple times. To account for this, we use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors clustered at the individual level. We also control for survey waves to account for changes over time in the data.

Our main parameters of interest are β^{uc} and β^c , representing the unconditional and conditional differences in LFP, respectively, between ethnic minority and White women. The difference $\Delta = \beta^{uc} - \beta^c$ captures the portion of the LFP gap explained by covariates and we aim to understand what proportion of this explained difference can be attributed to the different components of the covariate vector, X_{ij} . Usually, the contribution of different covariates to the difference in the unconditional and conditional estimates is obtained by running intermediate regressions including one covariate at a time and seeing how the estimated coefficient on the ethnicity dummy changes; but this approach is path dependent. The sequence in which the covariates are added can change their contribution, especially when the covariates are intercorrelated. Gelbach's decomposition overcomes this by estimating how each covariate (or a set of covariates) reduces the unconditional ethnic gap while controlling for all other variables.³

Gelbach's decomposition of the difference between the unconditional and the conditional coefficient can be written as:

$$\Delta = \beta^{uc} - \beta^c = \sum_j \gamma_j (\bar{X}_j^{em} - \bar{X}_j^w) = \sum_j \gamma_j \pi_j \quad (3)$$

where $\pi_j (= \bar{X}_j^{em} - \bar{X}_j^w)$ is the mean difference between the two ethnic groups in the covariate X_{ij} ; where w indicates the White majority group and em indicates the ethnic minority group; γ_j is the estimated coefficient for the covariate X_{ij} in the full regression (Equation (2) above). $\gamma_j \pi_j$ is the contribution of the covariate X_{ij} to the total explained difference (Δ), this can be interpreted as the mean difference in the covariate among the two groups, weighted by that

³ In Appendix B, we highlight the importance of addressing sequencing bias using methods such as Gelbach's decomposition. We illustrate how the estimated contribution of covariates to the difference between unconditional and conditional LFP gaps can vary substantially when intercorrelated covariates are added sequentially, a common practice in the literature, and when their order of inclusion changes.

covariate's impact on the outcome. The contribution of the covariate to the total explained differences can be positive or negative, depending on the sign of the estimated coefficient γ_j ; that is, whether the covariate has a positive or a negative impact on LFP, and on whether the mean of the covariate is bigger in the minority or White majority sample. A covariate's contribution to the decomposition may be zero (or statistically insignificant) if its mean does not differ between groups or if its coefficient in the LFP equation is zero. However, even when a covariate differs across groups and has a significant coefficient, its contribution can still be zero. This occurs when the conditional correlation between ethnicity and the covariate is orthogonal to the conditional correlation between the covariate and LFP. For further details, see [Gelbach \(2016\)](#).⁴

3.2 Variables and descriptive statistics

Outcome: The main outcome of interest is the LFP of women. We define this as women who are either in work (employees or self-employed) and those who are looking for work (unemployed); all other women are classified as not participating in the labour force. The sample includes 34,534 person-wave observations from 18,379 unique women. Of these, 5,082 (28%) appear in all three waves, 7,306 (40%) in only one wave, and 5,991 (32%) in two waves, which may be non-consecutive due to UKHLS's design. In our analysis, Caribbean women have the highest LFP (91%), followed by White women (88%), Other Black women (82%), Indian women (81%), with Bangladeshi (54%) and Pakistani women (52%) having the lowest participation.

Covariates: The description of the covariates used in the analysis is given in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.1](#), and the descriptive statistics by ethnic groups are reported in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.2](#).

Our model includes key human capital controls, such as age and educational qualifications, and is further enhanced by variables like age when arrived in the UK and English proficiency. While these additional variables are not direct proxies and provide only partial measures, they indicate social interaction with natives, familiarity with the host country, and accumulation of social capital, which can support labour market-relevant skills and integration. Age of arrival in the UK is coded from the year of birth and arrival in the UK, taking the value zero for UK-born women or those arriving in their birth year. For descriptive statistics only, we also report the proportion of women born abroad. Most ethnic minority women in the sample were born abroad, which ranges from 88% for Other Black women to 33% for Caribbean women, with over half of South Asian women foreign-born. We also consider household composition factors such as the presence of children by age group, living with a partner, and whether the respondent's parent lives in the household. The co-resident parent could be mother/father/both.

Next, while our proxies are limited, we consider generational and intergenerational elements. To touch upon generational differences, we include birth cohorts in our analysis, distinguishing between those born in the 1940s–50s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and, 1990s–2000s. Additionally, we control for whether the respondent woman's mother was employed when the woman was 14 years old, allowing us to capture intergenerational effects, including how

⁴ While the Oaxaca–Blinder (OB) decomposition is commonly used to analyse group differences in mean outcomes, it differs from the Gelbach decomposition in both purpose and interpretation. The OB approach partitions the total mean gap into 'explained' and 'unexplained' components, the latter reflecting differences in coefficients that are often difficult to interpret. By contrast, the Gelbach decomposition focuses exclusively on the explained component and provides a transparent attribution of the outcome gap to observed characteristics. As this paper is concerned with explaining the observed gap, we employ the Gelbach decomposition, noting that the OB decomposition is nested within this framework ([Gelbach 2016](#)).

having a working mother might shape a woman's LFP behaviour. Research shows strong maternal influence on gender norms, influencing children's attitudes toward work and family (Blau et al. 2013; Farré and Vella 2013; Johnston et al. 2014). Women are more likely to work if their mothers did, and, as Schmitz and Spiess (2022) show, also if their partners were raised by working mothers.

To account for women's financial position and socioeconomic background, we include household resources measured by net household income excluding the respondent's own earnings. We also included parental socioeconomic status (SES) as a robustness check, measured by parental occupational status when the respondent was 14 and categorized as high, medium, or low. However, as will be discussed when interpreting our results, our preferred specifications focus primarily on current household resources. This is because including parental SES did not change our main results but reduced the sample size, as this information is not available for all women.

We measure gender norms using attitudinal questions available in the UKHLS. In waves 2, 4, and 10 of the UKHLS, all respondents are presented with five statements relating to their attitudes toward gender roles/norms: (i) 'Pre-school child suffers if mother works'; (ii) 'Family suffers if mother works full time'; (iii) 'Husband and wife should contribute to household income'; (iv) 'Husband should earn, wife should stay at home'; and (v) 'Employers should help mothers combine jobs and childcare'. For each statement, respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from, 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 4= disagree, to 5= strongly disagree. We keep the original Likert scale coding for statements (iii) and (v), while the coding for statements (i), (ii), and (iv) is reversed. Responses to each statement are then summed to create an overall gender norms index, which ranges from 5 to 25. A higher value on the index indicates more traditional views on gender norms, while a lower value corresponds to more egalitarian gender norms.

Overall, the covariates explored in our main model can be broadly categorized as follows: (1) *human capital*, including women's age, and education; (2) *integration with the host country*, proxied by age on arrival to the UK, and English language proficiency; (3) *household composition*, with indicators for the presence and age of children in the household, having a partner, and co-residence with parents; (4) *household resources*, measured using household net income (excluding women's own income); (5) *gender norms*; and (6) *generational and intergenerational effects*, accounting for through birth cohorts and the respondent mother's employment status, respectively.

The detailed summary statistics are presented in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.2](#). Briefly, ethnic minority women are more likely than White women to be born abroad, arrive in the UK in their late teens or early twenties, have young children, co-reside with parents, and report limited English proficiency. Pakistani and Bangladeshi women generally have lower educational attainment and lower mother's employment, whereas over half of Indian, Caribbean, and Other Black women hold a degree or higher, with particularly high rates of mother's employment at age 14 among Caribbean women. [Supplementary Appendix Table A.2](#) also reports the aggregated gender norms index, which confirms that, on average, gender norms are more traditional among ethnic minority women, while Caribbean women report the least traditional norms. For the regressions analysis, we use standardized gender norms (with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1); with standardizations done over the whole sample of women—White and minority women together. [Supplementary Appendix Table A.3](#) reports the summary statistics of the parental SES. Bangladeshi women are more often from

Table 1 Linear probability model for ethnic differences in women's labour force participation.

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
Panel A: Unconditional gap					
ED	-0.071*** (0.014)	-0.360*** (0.019)	-0.336*** (0.026)	0.030** (0.012)	-0.056*** (0.016)
R ²	0.002	0.036	0.017	0.000	0.001
Panel B: Conditional gap					
ED	0.011 (0.014)	-0.146*** (0.020)	-0.116*** (0.024)	0.021* (0.012)	0.051** (0.022)
R ²	0.161	0.195	0.176	0.157	0.160
N	31,516	31,320	30,789	31,014	31,035

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $P < .10$, ** $P < .05$, *** $P < .01$.

ED is the ethnicity dummy. Unconditional gap is obtained from the regression with only the ethnicity dummy. Conditional gap is obtained from the regression with the full set of controls; the full regression is given in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.4](#). In each column, we compare the ethnic minority women to the same sample of White women.

Data source: UKHLS.

lower SES backgrounds, Indian women from higher SES, and Caribbean women show low incidence of non-working parents and a relatively even SES distribution.⁵

There is evidence in the literature about considerable heterogeneity in the LFP of women with children and/or women in partnership. To address this, we conduct additional subsample analyses.⁶ First, we restrict the sample to mothers. Second, we perform a heterogeneity check focusing exclusively on women in partnerships. This latter analysis, focusing on the women in partnership, also allows us to investigate the extent to which partner characteristics play an additional role in explaining ethnic minority women's LFP. In these models, we include detailed information about partners, such as their education, employment, whether their mothers worked when they were 14 years old, their UK-born status and if the partner is White British, which further accounts for the role of integration. Additionally, we consider partners' attitudes toward gender roles by constructing a gender norm index for partners using the same set of attitudinal questions.

4. Ethnic differences in LFP

4.1 Unconditional vs. conditional difference

In panel A of [Table 1](#), we report the unconditional ethnic differences, β^{UC} , in the LFP rates, where all ethnic minority women are compared to the same set of White British women. These are the estimates from [Equation \(1\)](#). All ethnic minority women, except for Caribbean women, have lower LFP rates, with the difference ranging from 5.6% for Other Black women to 36% for Pakistani women. Caribbean women report 3% higher LFP rates relative to White

⁵ Summary statistics for other characteristics, for the sample where parental SES are available, are similar to those of the main sample (available upon request).

⁶ Given the nature of attitudinal questions, one might argue that they predominantly pertain to motherhood or women in partnerships. This is another reason to do heterogeneity analysis.

women. In Panel B we have the estimates for the conditional ethnic difference, β^c , in LFP rates. Once we control for all covariates, we find no statistically significant difference in the LFP rates between Indian and White women. For Pakistani women, the LFP gap drops from 36% to 14.6%; that is, more than half of the observed gap between Pakistani and White women is explained by the characteristics we use in the model. Similarly, for Bangladeshi women, the unconditional LFP rate gap drops from 33.6% to a conditional gap of 11.6%. For Other Black women, the statistically significant negative unconditional gap becomes a statistically significant positive conditional gap. This indicates that, after controlling for a full range of covariates, Other Black women are more likely to be in the labour force relative to their White peers. For the Caribbean women, the gap in the LFP rates, relative to the White women, decrease after controlling for the full range of covariates.

Table 1 indicates that the characteristics we controlled for help us explain some, if not all, of the gap in the LFP rate between ethnic minority women and their White peers. When examining the estimated coefficients for the full specification, reported in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.4](#), estimated parameters for all covariates have the expected signs. Human capital variables play a significant role in the LFP of women. Age exhibits a quadratic relationship with LFP, it initially increases with age and then declines. Education is strongly associated with increased LFP. The estimated coefficients also indicate the importance of integration and familiarity with the host country. Higher age of arrival in the UK decreases the LFP rate; lack of proficiency in English, however, remains largely insignificant, other than the specification with Pakistani women. With regards to household composition and resources, in line with the previous evidence, having children and a partner is negatively associated with LFP, while having co-resident parent(s) increases the likelihood of LFP for women, potentially reflecting their contribution to childcare and/or household chores. Higher household income (excluding women's own income) positively correlates with LFP, suggesting that financial hardship may not be the primary driver for the LFP of women. Additionally, having a mother who worked when the women were 14 is positively linked to their LFP. The negative coefficient on gender norms indicate that more traditional gender attitudes are associated with a lower likelihood of LFP among women.

To explore the role of parental SES and its interaction with gender role attitudes, we estimated separate models including parental SES. Including parental SES, or its interaction with gender role attitudes, does not change the findings. The conditional and the unconditional ethnic differences in LFP in this sample remain similar to those in the main sample, and the coefficients on parental SES remain largely insignificant (see [Supplementary Appendix Tables A.5, A.6, and A.7](#)). Parental SES does not appear to have a direct effect on ethnic differences in labour supply. Furthermore, it does not systematically moderate the influence of gender norms on ethnic differences in labour supply in adulthood. It is also important to note that including parental SES substantially reduces the analytical sample, limiting statistical power and potentially contributing to the absence of detectable interaction effects.⁷

We also run a specification including interactions between gender norms and current household income; this is done for our main sample. Interaction between gender norms and current household income displays a clearer and more robust pattern. Traditional gender norms are strongly associated with lower LFP, and this negative association is stronger at

⁷ We also examined ethnic groups separately by estimating distinct LFP models for each ethnic group and for White women. In these models, we tested interactions between parental SES and gender role attitudes within each group. In addition, we estimated models on the full sample that included ethnic group indicators and interactions between parental SES and gender role attitudes. Across all specifications, estimated coefficients on parental SES and the interactions between parental SES and gender norms were small, statistically insignificant, and inconsistent. Results are available upon request.

higher levels of household income ([Supplementary Appendix Table A.8](#)). This suggests that the impact of gender norms may be conditional on the contemporaneous economic context: when household resources are limited, financial necessity constrains the extent to which restrictive norms can lead to non-participation; when resources are more abundant, such norms are more strongly reflected in labour supply behaviour. However, comparison of row 1 in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.8](#) with panel B of [Table 2](#) shows that the inclusion of this interaction does not alter the conditional ethnic gap in LFP.

4.2 Decomposition

Our primary focus is on understanding the explained gap—the difference between unconditional and conditional ethnic disparities in the LFP rate. To determine the contribution of various covariates to the explained ethnic gaps, we employ Gelbach's decomposition, with the results presented in [Table 2](#).

The unconditional LFP gap between Indian and White British women is statistically significant at 7.1% (Panel A, [Table 1](#)). However, after controlling for a full set of covariates, the conditional difference becomes insignificant at 1.1% (Panel B, [Table 1](#)). This leaves a total gap of 8.2% to be explained (last row, [Table 2](#)). For Indian women, integration with the host country is the biggest contributor to the explained gap, accounting for 55% of it, with age at arrival having the most pronounced effect. Household composition accounts for an additional 27% of the explained gap, with the largest effect driven by children in the family. Gender norms contribute a further 25%, indicating that more traditional beliefs play a substantial role in ethnic LFP gap. In other words, if Indian women had higher levels of integration, fewer children, and less traditional gender norms, their LFP rate would likely be higher, narrowing the gap with White British women. Furthermore, having a mother who worked when the respondent women were 14 years old accounts for 11% of the observed gap. Differences in human capital between Indian and White British, with Indian women having higher levels of education, does not significantly explain the ethnic gap between Indian women and White women.

The unconditional LFP rate gap between Pakistani and White British women reduces from 36% to 14.6% when we use the full set of covariates, a reduction of 21.4% points. As shown in [Table 2](#), proxies for integration account for 34% of this explained gap, followed by household composition at 29%, and women's attitudes towards gender norms accounting for another 23%. Similar to Indian women, the household composition effect is mainly driven by the presence of children; however, for integration with the host country, both the lack of proficiency in the English language and age on arrival contribute significantly to the explained gap. For Bangladeshi women, the unconditional and conditional LFP rate gap differs by 22% points; similar to Pakistani women, this difference is primarily explained by limited integration with the host country, alongside household composition and gender norms. Additionally, human capital factors explain a further 16% and 20% of the gap for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, respectively. This is not surprising, as both Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are less likely than White women to hold a degree or higher education and are more likely to be younger (thus likely to have lower labour market experience).

Caribbean women have higher LFP rates relative to White British women; while the gap remains positive, it becomes smaller when accounting for covariates. The primary drivers of this difference are gender norms and human capital. Compared to White women, Caribbean women are more likely to embrace egalitarian gender norms and attain higher education, both of which substantially contribute to their higher LFP rates. Notably, if Caribbean women had the same gender norms or human capital levels as White women, their LFP rates would likely be lower. While integration with the host country remains a significant barrier to

Table 2 Gelbach's decomposition.

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
Human capital	0.004 (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.005)	-0.045*** (0.007)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.001 (0.004)
	-5	16	20	135	-1
<i>Age</i>	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.021*** (0.006)	0.006*** (0.002)	-0.003 (0.003)
<i>Education</i>	0.006*** (0.002)	-0.020*** (0.003)	-0.023*** (0.005)	0.006** (0.002)	0.004 (0.003)
Household composition	-0.022*** (0.004)	-0.061*** (0.005)	-0.066*** (0.007)	0.006 (0.005)	-0.043*** (0.005)
	27	29	30	67	40
<i>Children</i>	-0.021*** (0.004)	-0.064*** (0.004)	-0.069*** (0.006)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.048*** (0.005)
<i>Partner</i>	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.005*** (0.001)
<i>Co-resident parent (own)</i>	0.001* (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.004** (0.002)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Household resources	0.002*** (0.001)	0.001*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.002)	-0.005*** (0.001)
	-2	-1	-1	-62	4
Own gender norms	-0.021*** (0.003)	-0.049*** (0.003)	-0.039*** (0.004)	0.012*** (0.003)	-0.013*** (0.003)
	25	23	18	146	12
Integration with host country	-0.045*** (0.011)	-0.072*** (0.013)	-0.076*** (0.015)	-0.014*** (0.005)	-0.050*** (0.019)
	55	34	34	-171	47
<i>Age on arrival</i>	-0.039*** (0.011)	-0.050*** (0.010)	-0.057*** (0.012)	-0.014*** (0.005)	-0.046** (0.019)
<i>English proficiency not-good</i>	-0.006 (0.010)	-0.023* (0.012)	-0.019 (0.014)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.004 (0.010)
Mother worked	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.016*** (0.003)	-0.018*** (0.003)	0.003*** (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)
	11	7	8	32	4
Birth cohort	0.008*** (0.002)	0.018*** (0.005)	0.022*** (0.006)	-0.004** (0.002)	0.008*** (0.003)
	-10	-8	-10	-45	-7
Waves	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
	0	0	0	-3	0

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
Total difference	−0.082*** (0.013)	−0.214*** (0.015)	−0.220*** (0.019)	0.008 (0.008)	−0.106*** (0.021)
N	31,516	31,320	30,789	31,014	31,035

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $P < .10$, ** $P < .05$, *** $P < .01$.

Human capital includes age, age squared, and education dummies. Household composition includes dummies for children in different age groups, a dummy for living with a partner, and a dummy indicating whether the respondent woman has a co-resident parent. Household resources are captured by household income, excluding own income. Integration with the host country is captured by age on arrival, and a dummy for English language proficiency. Mother worked captures intergenerational factors, and birth cohort dummies account for generational factors. Waves include a dummy for wave 4 and 10. For a full definition of all variables, see [Supplementary Appendix Table A.1](#). The italicized numbers below the standard errors give the % contribution to the total difference.

Data source: UKHLS.

Caribbean women's LFP, this disadvantage is largely attributed to their age of arrival to the UK rather than language barriers, as the vast majority speak English as their first language. Although we control for a wide range of characteristics, the higher LFP of Caribbean women may be influenced by factors not captured in our models, suggesting a greater necessity for employment. For Other Black women, the ethnic gap in LFP goes from unconditional -5.6% to conditional $+5.1\%$. The main factors explaining this movement from a lower to higher LFP, relative to White women, are household composition and proxies for integration with the host country.

With regard to our efforts to explore interactions between household resources and gender norms, in the model with interactions, household resources alone explain relatively little of the ethnic gaps, whereas gender norms remained important, with the interaction between norms and household income making a small but statistically significant additional contribution (see [Supplementary Appendix Table A.9](#)). The contribution of interaction effects is comparable across ethnic groups.⁸

Before turning to heterogeneity analyses, we assess the robustness of our LFP definition. Following the ILO, LFP includes both employed and unemployed women. However, the unemployment rates differ by ethnicity ([Mirza and Warwick 2024](#)), with the unemployment rates in our analysis sample being: 5% for White women, 8% for Indians, 12% for Pakistanis, 13% for Bangladeshi, and 11% for Caribbean and Other Black women. We therefore re-estimate our main models excluding unemployed women. [Supplementary Appendix Table A.10](#) reports the resulting unconditional and conditional LFP gaps. Excluding unemployed women increases the estimated ethnic gaps, particularly in the unconditional models, while conditional results remain qualitatively similar. As before, the conditional gap for Indian women is not statistically significant. In contrast, large and statistically significant negative gaps persist for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women and are slightly larger in this sample. For Caribbean women, as for Indian women, the conditional gap is no longer statistically significant. Decomposition results for this sample (available on request) show similar covariate contributions to the explained gap.

⁸ When a model includes an interaction between two variables, the individual effects and the interaction effect cannot be interpreted independently in a decomposition and must be considered jointly. We also did decomposition for the specification with parental SES as a covariate. The estimated coefficients for parental SES were largely insignificant and therefore did not contribute to the explained difference in decomposition. Results are available on request.

4.3 Heterogeneity analyses

4.3.1 Women with children

We conduct a series of heterogeneity analyses to examine whether the associations identified in our main results vary across key subgroups of women. First, we restrict the sample to mothers only as some of the questions used to construct the gender norms index may particularly relate to motherhood. LFP rates among mothers are lower than in the full sample (see [Supplementary Appendix Table A.11](#) for descriptive statistics). [Table 3](#) reports unconditional and conditional ethnic gaps in LFP for women with children; relative to White women, the unconditional gap in this sample is narrower for Indian and Other Black women, larger for Caribbean women, and similar to the main sample for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Once controls are included, the LFP gap becomes insignificant for Indian and Caribbean women. Full linear probability model estimates are reported in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.12](#).

[Table 4](#) presents the decomposition results for women with children. Household composition is broadly similar across ethnic groups in this sample, reducing its explanatory power for LFP gaps relative to the main sample. An exception is Caribbean women, for whom household composition—driven mainly by partner status—continues to explain their higher LFP relative to White women. Living with a partner negatively affects women's LFP, and Caribbean women with children are least likely to have a partner, 42% compared to 77% of White women.

For South Asian and Other Black women, integration with the host country (driven by age on arrival) and gender norms are the main drivers of the explained LFP gap among women with children, with gender norms playing a stronger role than in the main sample. Their relative importance varies across groups: integration matters more for Indian and Bangladeshi women, while gender norms are more influential for Pakistani women. For Caribbean women, the two factors operate in opposite directions, while their egalitarian gender norms increase their LFP rates, lack of integration hinders the participation rate. Human capital

Table 3 Linear probability model for ethnic differences in labour force participation of women with children.

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
Panel A: No controls					
ED	-0.056*** (0.021)	-0.355*** (0.022)	-0.332*** (0.029)	0.041* (0.022)	-0.046** (0.023)
R ²	0.001	0.039	0.018	0.000	0.000
Panel B: Full set of controls					
ED	0.034 (0.021)	-0.155*** (0.026)	-0.104*** (0.032)	0.021 (0.022)	0.067** (0.034)
R ²	0.167	0.199	0.182	0.160	0.163
N	14,148	14,240	13,838	13,815	13,959

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $P < .10$, ** $P < .05$, *** $P < .01$.

Regression with a full set of controls is given in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.12](#).

See notes to [Table 1](#).

Data source: UKHLS.

Table 4 Gelbach's decomposition, for women with children.

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
Human capital	0.015*** (0.005)	-0.056*** (0.007)	-0.067*** (0.009)	0.016* (0.008)	-0.004 (0.007)
	-17	28	29	81	3
<i>Age</i>	0.007** (0.003)	-0.025*** (0.005)	-0.031*** (0.007)	0.012* (0.007)	0.002 (0.004)
<i>Education</i>	0.009** (0.004)	-0.031*** (0.005)	-0.036*** (0.007)	0.004 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)
Household composition	-0.006** (0.003)	0.005 (0.004)	0.006 (0.005)	0.019*** (0.006)	0.011*** (0.004)
	7	-2	-2	94	-10
<i>Children</i>	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.002)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)
<i>Partner</i>	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	0.017*** (0.006)	0.011*** (0.003)
<i>Co-resident parent (own)</i>	0.001 (0.001)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.004)	0.005* (0.002)	0.003* (0.002)
Household resources	0.007*** (0.002)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.002)	-0.017*** (0.005)	-0.014*** (0.004)
	-7	-2	-2	-83	13
Own gender norms	-0.034*** (0.005)	-0.079*** (0.005)	-0.063*** (0.007)	0.022*** (0.006)	-0.024*** (0.006)
	38	40	28	107	21
Integration with host country	-0.055*** (0.016)	-0.055*** (0.017)	-0.087*** (0.023)	-0.021** (0.009)	-0.073** (0.030)
	61	28	38	-104	65
<i>Age on arrival</i>	-0.047*** (0.017)	-0.052*** (0.015)	-0.078*** (0.020)	-0.021** (0.009)	-0.073** (0.031)
<i>English proficiency not-good</i>	-0.008 (0.015)	-0.003 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.020)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.015)
Mother worked	-0.017*** (0.003)	-0.029*** (0.005)	-0.033*** (0.006)	0.003* (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.002)
	19	14	15	16	8
Birth cohort	-0.001 (0.001)	0.008* (0.004)	0.009 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.001)
	1	-4	-4	-10	0
Wave	0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.000)
	-2	-1	-1	0	-1
Total difference	-0.090*** (0.019)	-0.200*** (0.020)	-0.228*** (0.027)	0.020 (0.013)	-0.113*** (0.032)
N	14,148	14,240	13,838	13,815	13,959

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $P < .10$, ** $P < .05$, *** $P < .01$.

See notes to Table 2.

Data source: UKHLS.

Table 5 Linear probability model for ethnic differences in labour force participation of women in partnership.

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
Panel A: No controls					
ED	-0.095*** (0.020)	-0.491*** (0.028)	-0.471*** (0.039)	0.043 (0.027)	-0.009 (0.026)
R ²	0.004	0.067	0.034	0.000	0.000
Panel B: Full set of controls					
ED	0.089*** (0.026)	-0.162*** (0.039)	-0.118** (0.048)	0.074** (0.030)	0.186*** (0.048)
R ²	0.168	0.220	0.192	0.160	0.159
N	12,706	12,482	12,268	12,183	12,242

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $P < .10$, ** $P < .05$, *** $P < .01$.

Regression with a full set of controls is given in [Supplementary Appendix Table A.14](#).

See notes to [Table 1](#).

Data Source: UKHLS.

also plays an increasing role for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, if their human capital levels matched those of White women, the LFP gap would be smaller. Conversely, for Indian and Caribbean women, the gap would be wider under this scenario.

4.3.2 Women in partnership

Next, we focus on women living with a partner to explore whether partner characteristics play an additional role in ethnic minority women's LFP. We restrict the analysis to heterosexual couples and exclude same-sex couples. Restricting the sample to partnered women with available partner data significantly reduces the sample size, particularly for Caribbean and Other Black women, due to their lower partnership rates.

Consistent with the literature, partnered South Asian women have lower LFP than those in the main sample, while partnered Caribbean and Other Black women have higher participation; while participation rates among White women is similar across samples (see [Supplementary Appendix Table A.13](#) for descriptive statistics). As a result, the unconditional LFP gap between South Asian and White women widens in the partnership sample, ranging from nearly 49% for Pakistani women to 9.5% for Indian women, while gaps for Caribbean and Other Black women become insignificant ([Table 5](#)). By contrast, the conditional gap (also shown in [Table 5](#)) is positive and statistically significant for Indian women (8.9%) and for Caribbean and Other Black women. In other words, conditional on observed characteristics, partnered Indian, Caribbean, and Other Black women are more likely to work than their White counterparts.⁹

When looking at the decomposition results ([Table 6](#)), for South Asian women, integration, household composition, and personal gender norms remain the main explanatory factors. Partners' characteristics also matter, particularly for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, for

⁹ We are, however, cautious in interpreting this as direct evidence of an advantageous position for partnered minority women, and future research is needed to examine whether higher LFP translates into comparable working conditions (e.g. wages, hours of work, and career progression) relative to the majority group once in the labour force.

Table 6 Gelbach's decomposition, for women in partnership.

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
Human capital	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.046*** (0.010)	-0.062*** (0.013)	0.012** (0.005)	-0.004 (0.007)
	4	14	17	-37	2
<i>Age</i>	-0.011** (0.005)	-0.025*** (0.009)	-0.027*** (0.010)	0.006* (0.003)	-0.015** (0.006)
<i>Education</i>	0.004 (0.003)	-0.021*** (0.004)	-0.034*** (0.007)	0.005 (0.004)	0.011*** (0.004)
Household composition	-0.029*** (0.005)	-0.065*** (0.007)	-0.080*** (0.009)	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.045*** (0.007)
	16	20	23	36	23
<i>Children</i>	-0.027*** (0.004)	-0.060*** (0.006)	-0.071*** (0.007)	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.042*** (0.007)
<i>Co-resident parents</i>	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.009* (0.005)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)
Household resources	-0.000 (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.004** (0.002)	0.007** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.004)
	0	-1	-1	-24	-6
Own gender norms	-0.022*** (0.004)	-0.059*** (0.005)	-0.047*** (0.006)	0.021*** (0.008)	-0.004 (0.006)
	12	18	13	-66	2
Integration with host country	-0.091*** (0.020)	-0.097*** (0.024)	-0.104*** (0.030)	-0.046*** (0.016)	-0.121*** (0.040)
	49	29	29	147	62
<i>Age on arrival</i>	-0.072*** (0.020)	-0.072*** (0.021)	-0.090*** (0.026)	-0.046*** (0.016)	-0.112*** (0.042)
<i>English proficiency not-good</i>	-0.018 (0.017)	-0.025 (0.023)	-0.014 (0.027)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.009 (0.017)
Mother worked	-0.005* (0.003)	-0.007* (0.004)	-0.009* (0.005)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)
	3	2	3	-2	1
Partner's mother worked	-0.010*** (0.003)	-0.016*** (0.004)	-0.016*** (0.004)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.003** (0.002)
	5	5	5	3	2
Partner's characteristics	-0.019 (0.016)	-0.037** (0.017)	-0.034* (0.018)	-0.015 (0.011)	-0.034** (0.017)
	10	11	10	48	18
<i>Partner works</i>	0.002 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.006* (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.008** (0.004)
<i>Partner degree or higher</i>	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.002)

(continued)

Table 6 (continued)

	(1) Indian	(2) Pakistani	(3) Bangladeshi	(4) Caribbean	(5) Other Black
<i>Partner foreign born</i>	0.004 (0.012)	-0.003 (0.012)	0.001 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.007)	-0.004 (0.015)
<i>Partner White UK</i>	-0.026 (0.017)	-0.031* (0.018)	-0.030* (0.017)	-0.016 (0.012)	-0.024 (0.016)
Partner's gender norms	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.028*** (0.003)	-0.022*** (0.004)	0.005 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)
	5	8	6	-15	1
Birth cohort	0.008 (0.005)	0.021** (0.010)	0.018 (0.011)	-0.002 (0.003)	0.010* (0.005)
	-4	-6	-5	8	-5
Wave	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
	0	1	0	3	0
Total difference	-0.184*** (0.026)	-0.329*** (0.031)	-0.353*** (0.038)	-0.031 (0.022)	-0.195*** (0.044)
N	12,706	12,482	12,268	12,183	12,242

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $P < .10$, ** $P < .05$, *** $P < .01$.

See notes to Table 2.

Data source: UKHLS.

whom having a White British partner reduces the ethnic gap in LFP.¹⁰ Partners' traditional gender norms account for an additional 5%–8% of the LFP gap; for Caribbean women, partners' less traditional norms increase their LFP. Combined, both personal and partners' gender norms explain a similar share of the ethnic gap among partnered women as they do for the overall sample. Along with a woman's own mother working playing a significant role for South Asian women, the employment status of the partner's mother also plays a significant role in explaining the ethnic differences in LFP rates. For Other Black women, gender norms are statistically insignificant in explaining the LFP gaps, while household composition and integration with the host country remain important.

4.3.3 Age-restricted sample

Finally, we focus on women aged 25–54. This is the age group when individuals are less likely to be inactive by choice—they are less likely to be students and retired—and thus more likely to be in the labour force (Barr et al. 2019). The covariates used for this sample are the same as those for the main sample. The decomposition results are consistent with the main sample, showing that household composition, integration with the host country, and individual gender norms remain the most important factors contributing to the explained ethnic gap in women's LFP. Results are not reported but are available on request.

¹⁰ We have to be cautious in interpreting this, as fewer than 2% of Pakistani women and only about 4% of Bangladeshi women have White British partners.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we examine ethnic gaps in women's LFP, highlighting the heterogeneity masked by average figures. While ethnic minority women are, on average, less likely to be economically active than their White British counterparts, substantial differences exist across groups—most notably, the relatively high LFP rates of Caribbean women and the markedly lower rates among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Using Gelbach decomposition, we quantify the contributions of individual, household, structural, and cultural factors to these gaps, providing a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of ethnic disparities in women's LFP.

Our findings indicate that, beyond education, household structure, familiarity with the UK context, and gender norms are critical determinants of labour market participation. These influences are neither uniform nor fixed; they differ significantly across ethnic groups and generations. Age at arrival in the UK emerges as a key barrier for foreign-born women, particularly among South Asian groups, reflecting ongoing challenges of social and economic integration. Household composition—especially the presence of young children and partnership status—further constrains LFP among South Asian women, with limited compensatory support from co-resident parents.

Attitudes towards gender roles also play a crucial role, with traditional views notably contributing to the lower LFP rates of South Asian women compared to White British counterparts. Also, among partnered women, partners' traditional gender role attitudes account for an additional 5%–8% of the LFP gap for South Asian women. In contrast, while acknowledging structural constraints such as the high incidence of single motherhood and a longstanding tradition of economic activity, more progressive gender attitudes help explain Caribbean women's higher LFP rates. Early-life experiences, such as having a working mother during adolescence, narrow the LFP gap for most ethnic minority groups. Although still exploratory, our findings further suggest an interplay between socioeconomic status and gender roles, mainly through current financial position. The negative relationship between traditional gender roles and LFP is stronger for women in high-income households, and this pattern holds across all ethnic groups. Moreover, the direct negative effect of gender norms remains robust even when interactions between current household resources and/or past SES and gender role attitudes are included. Gelbach decomposition also shows that, while statistically significant, the additional effect of these interactions is relatively small in explaining the ethnic gap in LFP. Together, these results underscore the importance of gender role attitudes in shaping women's economic engagement.

Although we focus on labour supply-side explanations, we recognize that demand-side factors, such as employer discrimination, are also likely to contribute to persistent gaps. These are difficult to measure directly, but existing evidence suggests considerable variation across groups (Zwysen et al. 2021), with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women facing greater barriers. These are also the groups for which the largest unexplained gaps remain, suggesting that discrimination or broader structural inequalities may play a substantial role. By focusing on women's LFP, we shed light on the first hurdle ethnic minority women face in the labour market. Although beyond the scope of this study, further research is needed to examine barriers encountered after labour market entry—including differences in wages, hours of work, job quality, and working conditions—to fully understand the origins of ethnic penalties.

While we do not establish a causal relationship, our findings have important policy implications. Targeted measures, such as integration programmes that strengthen social networks and develop soft skills, alongside initiatives aimed at challenging traditional gender norms through education and media, can help reduce barriers to participation. Support for

working mothers, including affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements, remains crucial across all groups. Addressing these intertwined factors is essential not only for improving economic outcomes for minority women but also for promoting broader social inclusion and equality in the UK labour market.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at the Oxford Economic Papers Journal online. These are the replication files and the **Supplementary Appendix**.

The data used in this article are available from: **University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2023)**. Study Number 6614 - Understanding Society: Waves 1–13, 2009–2022 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1–18, 1991–2009. 18th Edition.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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