

Failing victims, fuelling hate: challenging the harms of the ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ narrative

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Abstract: ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ have become a defining feature of media, political and public debate around child sexual exploitation in the UK. The dominant narrative that has emerged to explain a series of horrific cases is misleading, sensationalist and has in itself promoted a number of harms. This article examines how racist framings of ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ exist not only in extremist, far-right fringes but in mainstream, liberal discourses too. The involvement of supposedly feminist and liberal actors and the promotion of pseudoscientific ‘research’ have lent a veneer of legitimacy to essentialist, Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim men, the demonisation of whole communities and demands for collective responsibility. These developments are situated in the broader socio-political context, including the far Right’s weaponisation of women’s rights, the ‘Islamophobia industry’ and a long history of racialising crime. We propose alternative ways of understanding and responding to child sexual exploitation/abuse. We contend that genuinely anti-racist feminist approaches can help in centring victims/survivors and their needs and in tackling serious sexual violence without demonising entire communities.

Keywords: anti-Muslim racism, anti-racist feminism, child sexual abuse and exploitation, grooming gangs, Islamophobia, Quilliam

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ narrative has become firmly established in popular and political discourse in the UK. Claims of how Muslim culture and faith supposedly perpetuate sexual abuse have helped collectively demonise British Muslim communities, especially young Muslim men. Initially driven by the right-wing media, this construction has been advanced and legitimised by ostensibly liberal and feminist actors. Additional boosts have come via discredited, highly-politicised and partisan ‘research’ from special interest groups, apparently seeking to capitalise on wider anti-Muslim attitudes in order to influence government policy and otherwise profit. The ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ trope has enduring currency among right-wing and liberal political elites and, if left unchecked, risks fuelling further racialised and alarmist news coverage and informing misguided and harmful responses. Much of the narrative has centred around towns in the North and Midlands regions of England, where many particularly high-profile criminal convictions have taken place. Rotherham, in South Yorkshire, has arguably become the place most synonymous with ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ and has attracted the most attention from far-right groups. Home to a significant population of Asian Muslim heritage, workers from the Indian subcontinent initially arrived into towns such as Rotherham to work within the manufacturing sector and were often treated poorly in comparison to whites.¹ Like many other places in the former industrial heartlands in the North, Rotherham has struggled for decades with the effects of deindustrialisation – the loss of skilled, well-paid jobs, soaring unemployment and the destabilisation and fragmentation of communities.²

The central argument of the ‘grooming gangs’ narrative is, in short, that a ‘disproportionate’ number of Asian/Muslim/Pakistani-heritage men are involved in grooming (mostly) white British girls for organised sexual abuse. These claims are often substantiated with reference to a spate of high-profile prosecutions of so-called ‘grooming gangs’ in towns and cities such as Rotherham, Rochdale, Derby, Telford, Oxford, Huddersfield and Newcastle. The offenders in question – and undoubtedly many more -- have absolutely committed horrific crimes; this article is categorically not about denying their existence, belittling their harms or otherwise excusing the inexcusable. The term ‘grooming gangs’, however, is itself a spurious media construct and one that has been heavily racialised from the very start.³ ‘Grooming gangs’ simply do not correspond to established legal or social scientific categories and the various weak definitions offered up by proponents of this racialised narrative fail to delineate these offenders meaningfully from other groups of child sex offenders.⁴ Contrary to stereotypes, there is no ‘grooming’ offence⁵ – let alone a ‘grooming gangs’ offence; consequently, ‘grooming gang offenders’ cannot be sensibly disentangled from police recorded crime data or prosecution data. Moreover, and as will be shown later, a relatively small number of high-profile ‘grooming gangs’ cases have been used to claim an ‘epidemic’ of abuse. Despite routinely (and wrongly) being depicted as a ‘specific’ crime type, ‘grooming gangs’ are better

understood as a vaguely and inconsistently defined subset of child sexual exploitation (CSE) offenders.⁶ Complicating matters further, however, CSE is itself a poorly delineated subset of child sexual abuse (CSA) that spans diverse criminal offences (e.g. rape, sexual activity with a child) – most of which are also used in instances that would not normally be considered CSE.⁷ Existing data simply do not enable reliable assessments of the prevalence or correlates of CSE,⁸ let alone those of ‘grooming gangs’ – so claims of ethnic or religious disproportionality in ‘grooming gangs’ are just not testable in any meaningful sense.⁹

The ‘grooming gangs’ narrative belongs within a broader tendency to racialise crime in political and popular discourse. The classic example is the racialised panic in 1970s Britain in which young black men were cast as ‘muggers’.¹⁰ Fuelled by misleading statistics and misinformation, the devastating consequences included over-policing and criminalisation. In the US, the term ‘superpredator’ emerged in the 1990s, pushed forward by conservative thinkers as representing a new, hyper-violent crime phenomenon.¹¹ As Yamahtta-Taylor reminds us, the use of this term by former Secretary of State and former presidential candidate Hilary Clinton played directly into racist, damaging tropes about young black men: ‘The discourse of “super predators” was not an unfortunate misstatement; it was a racist, political calculation intended to publicly demonstrate a lack of sympathy for black people and support for a regime of punishment and retribution’.¹²

The racialisation of ‘grooming gangs’ must also be understood in the context of a long history of racialised and gendered Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim racism. Muslim men have been stereotyped as both religiously fanatical and prone to committing violent, sexual acts motivated by a patriarchal, misogynistic culture and backward, barbaric religion.¹³ Looking back over more than a decade, we document the architects of the ‘grooming gangs’ narrative, examine the political backdrop to it and consider the harms it causes. We also sketch out tangible ways forward, with implications for policymakers, practitioners and activists. We contend that genuinely practised anti-racist feminism is vital in tackling child sexual abuse and resisting anti-Muslim forces.

Introducing the key architects of the ‘grooming gangs’ narrative

Here, we consider how racialised discourse around ‘Asian sex gangs’ and ‘Muslim rape gangs’ emerged, proliferated and became entrenched. We focus on four main architects: media, politicians, the far Right and dubious ‘special interest groups’.

The media creates, spreads and sustains a toxic narrative

‘On-street grooming’ exploded into the national consciousness on 5 January 2011 when *The Times* – a right-wing broadsheet owned by Murdoch’s *News International* – ran a dramatic exposé claiming to have uncovered a new crime threat. Setting the bar for subsequent debate, evidence of just fifty-six convicted offenders was used to

substantiate alarmist claims of a ‘tidal wave of offending’.¹⁴ The story combined two particularly explosive contentions: that Pakistani-heritage men were preying on white British girls; and that the authorities failed to intervene ‘for fear of being branded racist’.¹⁵ *The Times*’ portrayal of ‘grooming’ as a distinct and racialised crime threat rests on ‘misconceptions, anecdote, opinion and the deliberate manipulation of limited statistics of dubious provenance’.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the coverage proved inflammatory and has set the news agenda in the decade since.

The journalist behind the story was a little-known regional correspondent called Andrew Norfolk. Soon promoted to *The Times*’ Chief Investigative Reporter, Norfolk pursued ‘grooming’-related stories doggedly over the coming years, combining major scoops with less obviously newsworthy stories seemingly chosen to stoke ‘his personally crafted crime model of white victims and Pakistani perpetrators’.¹⁷ He subsequently received some of the most prestigious awards in British journalism, including the Orwell Prize and Paul Foot Award. A series of discredited articles led Cathcart and French to examine whether Norfolk was sacrificing journalistic standards in a push to present ‘Muslims as threatening’.¹⁸ Their rigorous analysis of three major stories – two ‘grooming’-related and the now infamous ‘Muslim foster care’¹⁹ scandal – concluded that his central allegations were ‘unfounded’, ‘serious inaccuracies’ rife, ‘standards of conduct and ethics’ severely breached and ‘Norfolk’s impartiality’ highly questionable.²⁰ Editor John Witherow was complicit too, they argued, as the newspaper had ‘vigorously promoted Norfolk’s accusations, placing them on its front page, endorsing them in editorials and subsequently resisting complaints and criticisms in defiance of the evidence’.²¹ Maintaining this trend, *The Times* dismissed the forensic critique as a ‘politically motivated’ attempt to ‘smear and suppress fine reporting’.²²

His dubious journalistic standards notwithstanding, Norfolk’s racialised crime threat immediately caught the media, political and public imagination and soon became entrenched.²³ Phrases like ‘grooming gang’ have come to assume a particular and racially loaded meaning. Even a cursory news database search demonstrates how a new vocabulary emerged post-*Times* exposé: the term ‘grooming gang*’ returned 5,647 results in the nearly nine years since then, compared with *zero* in the nine years prior.²⁴ The term’s racialisation was as evident as its proliferation: over half the results contained references to ‘Islam*’, ‘Muslim*’, ‘Pakistan*’ or ‘Asian*’.²⁵ Indicating how this loaded language has leached even into professional discourse, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) recently issued a press release headlined ‘Six men convicted of Rotherham grooming gang offences’: to reiterate, ‘grooming gang offences’ do not exist in law.²⁶

Several academics have criticised the disparity between media portrayals of ‘Asian sex gangs’ and similarly high-profile white offenders, including celebrities and politicians.²⁷ According to Miah,²⁸ sexual abuses carried out by Asian offenders are explained in terms of race and culture, whereas their white counterparts’ crimes are framed as individual deviance.

Politicians give credibility to racial stereotypes around 'grooming'

Numerous mainstream politicians have helped propagate the 'grooming gangs' narrative through clumsy, misleading and/or outright racist contributions. Centre-left politicians have proved particularly pivotal in migrating rhetoric more characteristic of the far Right to the political mainstream.²⁹ Key early contributions came from Labour MP Jack Straw: despite apparent disinterest in CSE while home secretary, ahead of a critical by-election he notoriously blamed 'grooming' on regressive British-Pakistani culture, arranged marriages and views of white girls as 'easy meat'.³⁰ His comments not only farcically implied that raping children is the natural alternative to premarital sex³¹ but furthered myths that 'repressed sexuality' drives abuse and perpetrated Orientalist stereotypes about Muslim men's 'rapacious sexual appetites'.³² Other Labour politicians followed suit in emphasising the role of ethnicity and/or culture.³³ Such spurious 'cultural' explanations have been criticised both within and beyond the context of CSE as a backdoor for 'new racism' in a supposedly 'post-racial' society.³⁴

One particularly dramatic intervention came from Sarah Champion, Labour MP for Rotherham and, ironically, shadow secretary of state for women and equalities. Champion had to resign from the frontbench after writing an inflammatory article entitled 'British Pakistani men ARE raping and exploiting white girls ... and it's time we faced up to it' for *The Sun*, a *News International*-owned right-wing tabloid.³⁵ Champion wrote, 'These people are predators, and the common denominator is their ethnic heritage', claiming she was speaking out as she could no longer 'shy away from doing the right thing by fearing being called a racist'. Her views in this article were likened to those of the far Right, and she faced intense criticism including from some of her parliamentary colleagues and from local human rights groups in her Rotherham constituency.³⁶ Champion later apologised for her 'extremely poor choice of words', admitting the article 'could be taken to vilify an entire community'.³⁷ Her article notably appeared alongside and was endorsed by a column from *The Sun*'s former political editor Trevor Kavanagh, which characterised 'grooming gangs' as 'the Muslim problem': a framing heavily criticised for evoking Nazi-era rhetoric.³⁸ Kavanagh's article attracted official complaints but was cleared by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), which found it did not breach its guidelines. Kavanagh serves as a member of IPSO's regulatory board, although the body claimed he was not part of the investigation. The decision to clear Kavanagh's article was condemned by both the Muslim Council of Britain and the Board of Deputies of British Jews, which said the decision highlighted that IPSO was 'unfit for purpose'.³⁹

Conservative MP Sajid Javid, then communities secretary and now chancellor of the exchequer, vocally defended Champion's contribution and the need to examine 'racial motivation'.⁴⁰ The following year, Champion spearheaded a letter⁴¹ to Javid – by then home secretary – co-signed by twenty MPs, demanding research into the 'drivers' of 'organised grooming gangs'.⁴² The letter explicitly mentioned neither race nor religion, but by now 'grooming gangs' was clearly a racially coded term. An

interfaith group's follow-up letter supported Champion's demands, explicitly citing dubious evidence of ethnic disproportionality to bolster claims of a 'sexual grooming gang epidemic'.⁴³ Javid's response to Champion was scooped by *The Times'* aforementioned Andrew Norfolk and reported as the home secretary having 'ordered research into why men convicted of grooming-gang sex crimes are disproportionately of Pakistani origin'.⁴⁴ Although this angle misrepresented Javid's actual letter, it was repeated across numerous news outlets – and neither Javid nor Champion apparently cared to correct it.⁴⁵ Consequently, the impression stood that ethnic disproportionality in 'grooming gangs' was an accepted fact and legitimate focus for government-commissioned research.

Fuelling the fire, Javid later released a dog-whistle of a tweet about 'sick Asian paedophiles'.⁴⁶ His propagation of racial stereotypes is particularly important given his senior roles and British-Pakistani heritage: 'racial gatekeeping' lends social legitimacy to claims and policies that disadvantage racially marginalised groups.⁴⁷ Notably, Javid's interest in racialising sexual offending has not extended to organised abuse in schools, religious institutions, sports clubs, politics, celebrity circles and other contexts likely dominated by white offenders. Contributions to a recent House of Lords debate exemplify how politicians continue to stoke misleading narratives around 'grooming gangs', perhaps to further broader agendas of their own. Lord Singh, an independent peer who soon after quit the BBC over claims it was trying to silence him for fear of offending Muslims,⁴⁸ decried 'misplaced political correctness'. Baroness Cox, who previously lost the Conservative whip after urging voters to support UKIP,⁴⁹ appealed to collective responsibility, saying 'Muslim leaders' should 'take ownership of policies to prevent these atrocities'. Lord Cormack exceptionalised 'grooming gangs', treating them as emblematic of an entire community:

... it is deeply distressing that these people are disgracing themselves and their wider community, as well as the British community of which they have become a part.⁵⁰

The far Right embrace a made-to-measure Muslim threat

The far Right's enthusiasm for the 'Muslim grooming gangs' narrative is predictable. Yet, their messaging and activity feeds off and is given credence by racialising discourses already in circulation among mainstream politicians. Further underlining how ideas can migrate in both directions between parliament and far-right street forces, the extremist British National Party (BNP) was an original proponent of racialising CSE in the early 2000s.⁵¹ Since then, 'Muslim grooming gangs' have become a staple of far-right propaganda in the UK and beyond, forming a key 'mobilising trope' of the pan-European Counter-Jihad Movement.⁵² Overtly Islamophobic terms like 'rape jihad' play to fears of invasion and 'cultural replacement'. The far Right's weaponisation of CSE is much facilitated by needing only to echo and embellish tropes well-established in the mainstream. For example,

far-right propaganda text *Easy Meat* features familiar claims about the ‘epidemic of child-rape by grooming gangs’, failed multiculturalism, politically-correct cover-ups and the ‘collusion’ and collective responsibility of ‘the Muslim community’.⁵³ Notably, its author Peter McLoughlin later self-published the book *Mohammed’s Koran: why Muslims kill for Islam*, delisted by Amazon for its ‘inappropriate content’.⁵⁴ His co-author on the latter was ‘Tommy Robinson’ (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon): ex-English Defence League (EDL) leader and ‘rock star’ of the transatlantic and pan-European ‘counter-jihad’ movement.⁵⁵

In recent years, ‘Tommy Robinson’ has made CSE into his *cause célèbre*. He was recently appointed ‘special personal advisor on rape gangs’ to the leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP)⁵⁶ and invited to speak in the Czech Parliament about ‘grooming gangs’.⁵⁷ Of course, Robinson is neither the subject matter expert nor victims’ champion he claims to be. His outspokenness on child sexual abuse apparently does not extend to offences committed by fellow EDL extremists.⁵⁸ He was also imprisoned for contempt of court after breaching reporting restrictions at a major CSE trial in Huddersfield.⁵⁹ Testifying in sexual offences trials is already notoriously difficult and traumatic – even without the additional stress, delays and even appeals that such breaches of due process can cause.⁶⁰ Robinson’s acts were the latest in a long history of the far Right disrupting CSE trials by putting their own self-interests (promoting racism, publicity, campaign material, etc.) ahead of victims’ welfare and the administration of justice.⁶¹

‘Special interest’ groups provide the missing ‘research’

Stereotypes of ‘Muslim rape gangs’ were greatly boosted by the Quilliam Foundation’s ‘grooming gangs’ report source of the spurious but ubiquitous claim that ‘84% of grooming gang offenders’ are Asian.⁶² Although framed as ‘academic’⁶³ and ‘evidence-based’, the report is shoddy pseudoscience. Its conclusion that the ‘over-representation of Asian-ethnicity (predominantly British Pakistani origin) individuals ... is conclusively irrefutable’ (p. 6) is deeply misleading. The report in no way delivers on its pretence of ‘comprehensive data analysis of all group child-sex offences committed in the United Kingdom over a period of 12 years’ (p. 15). Tellingly, the key word ‘comprehensive’ was later deleted amid furtive corrections to the published report: when challenged, staff outright lied⁶⁴ and continued to meet valid criticisms with personal attacks.⁶⁵ The supposedly ‘specific crime profile’⁶⁶ under investigation is actually confused, inconsistent and incoherent.⁶⁷ The report is exceptionally weak methodologically: instead of disclosing fundamentals like sources, sampling strategy, search terms (if any) and inclusion parameters, we find vacuous assertions of ‘extensive data mining methods’ (p. 16). Bizarrely, its ‘data’ section is primarily a crude rehashing of *results* from an *entirely different* report divested of crucial caveats about its limitations.⁶⁸

Somehow – in a way impossible to verify – 264 offenders were identified across twelve years: horrific abuse notwithstanding, such a sample does not justify dramatic

claims of an ‘epidemic’ and ‘crisis’ (pp. 14, 33, 41). The data source remains unspecified but was likely media reports, seemingly cherry-picked to ‘definitively demonstrate’ a predetermined disproportionality (p. 15). Using media coverage to assess sexual offenders’ characteristics is problematic in any case, since offences by ethnic minorities tend to be over-reported:⁶⁹ a form of ‘deviance amplification’.⁷⁰ Worryingly, some academics (including the author of a book on ‘anti-racist practice in social work’) have since uncritically cited Quilliam’s drivel and even made a similarly dubious attempt to assess (dis)proportionality in CSE offending based on ‘Muslim names’ in media reports.⁷¹ This point further demonstrates that poor quality, partisan ‘research’ also has the capacity to influence and shape scholarly debate – a development that should alarm researchers.

Quilliam’s report and its ‘data analysis’ is basic counting at best, devoid of the transparency and rigour needed for any confidence in the findings. Despite the complete absence of statistical reporting around victims’ characteristics or offenders’ religion/national heritage, the authors contend that offenders were ‘predominantly British Pakistani origin’ and the ‘Asian male/white female, perpetrator-victim dynamic is the undeniable prominent feature’ (pp. 6, 30). Their claims to ‘list all possible caveats relating to the accuracy of the data’ and to have made ‘every attempt’ to ‘ensure the integrity of the information’ (p. 16) are patently untrue: obvious biases (e.g., sampling, self-selection, institutional or media biases) are overlooked and there is no sign of peer-review or any meaningful quality assurance. In fact, the report is riddled with untrue, misleading, contradictory, unsubstantiated and misattributed information.⁷² Information appears cherry-picked to support a central thesis that ‘regressive’ Pakistani culture drives abuse of white British girls. For example, the authors claim ‘racial difference ... [is] highlighted through repeated reference to the ‘whiteness’ of the victims’ (p. 7) but provide relevant supporting evidence for just *one* offender, thus grossly generalising from under 0.4 per cent of their sample. Similarly, they conveniently omit relevant court judgments that challenge racial/cultural explanations.⁷³ Further underlining their cavalier approach, the authors make sweeping, unsubstantiated claims that ‘grooming’ is caused by ‘divisive, unevolved cultural identities’, unchecked cultural misogyny, homophobia, insufficient integration of migrants, child marriage, and so on. (p. 32). The ‘regressive left’ and ‘extreme political correctness’ are duly blamed as well (pp. 40–41). Failing to declare funding or conflicts of interests is also problematic: this ‘counter-extremism think tank’ has a history of dubious funding and alliances, including partnering with ‘Tommy Robinson’ in his ill-fated ‘de-radicalisation’ and stood to gain from CSE being reconceptualised as a ‘counter-extremism’ threat.⁷⁴

Despite its interminable flaws, the Quilliam report attracted immediate, extensive and almost entirely uncritical publicity.⁷⁵ Playing into existing stereotypes, it provided the veneer of academic and statistical legitimacy largely missing to date. Some outlets further amplified the threat of the Muslim ‘other’ by misrepresenting the already spurious results as pertaining to all ‘grooming’: e.g. *The Sunday Times* was found to breach reporting codes with its misleading headline ‘Asians make up 80 per cent of

child groomers'.⁷⁶ In foregrounding their British-Pakistani heritage in the report and subsequent publicity, the Quilliam authors predictably helped detract from their lack of relevant academic or professional credentials and empowered responses like this one,

Islamophobia! Up goes the cry to quickly shut down debate. Sorry but that won't wash on this occasion. The Quilliam report is written by Haris Rafi [sic] and Muna Zainab, both of Pakistani heritage, so it's pretty hard to accuse them of demonizing Muslims.⁷⁷

Demonstrating how the report empowered Islamophobes, one UKIP politician praised 'some very courageous Muslims in the Quilliam Foundation' and their work tracing abuse 'back to the Islamic faith' when declaring that the UK faced 'a holocaust of our daughters'.⁷⁸ Another repeatedly cited it in the House of Lords to bolster his own claims of 'millions of rapes of white and Sikh girls by Muslim men' and '250,000 victims of radical Muslim grooming gangs'.⁷⁹ The 84 per cent statistic is regularly found in far-right materials on- and off-line. 'Tommy Robinson' even included Quilliam's report in his defence bundle, apparently to suggest his claims about 'grooming' were 'factually correct' and so would not have prejudiced the Huddersfield trial.⁸⁰

The fringe, nationalist Sikh Youth UK (SYUK) group then released a much lower-profile but similarly shoddy report, which addressed 'religiously aggravated sexual exploitation of young Sikh women'.⁸¹ SYUK had already been accused of propagating anti-Muslim hatred in collaborating with 'Tommy Robinson' around 'Muslim grooming gangs'.⁸² Further underlining how actors have forged questionable alliances around shared interests in the 'grooming' space, Sarah Champion MP – author of the racist article discussed earlier and much lauded by Quilliam⁸³ – backed both SYUK's inflammatory report⁸⁴ and its broader contested work around CSE.⁸⁵ The report was promoted across social and traditional media and at gurdwaras, where SYUK solicits donations.⁸⁶ Effectively a diatribe against Pakistani Muslims, this empirically and analytically weak publication makes inflammatory yet poorly substantiated claims of a 'grave, longstanding and targeted threat of sexual abuse and exploitation' and the attendant 'failures of law enforcement agencies and local authorities'.⁸⁷ Its underlying appeals to historical tensions and Islamophobia recall Sian's⁸⁸ critiques of the 'forced conversion' narrative, which has proven potent and durable among British Sikh diaspora communities despite there being no evidence of 'predatory' Muslim males grooming 'vulnerable' Sikh girls for conversion. Ironically, given the focus on sexual violence, women are implicitly treated in the SYUK report as possessions and a locus of shame and honour. Similar criticisms have been levied at the broader 'grooming' discourse among British Sikhs, with female Sikh activists complaining that women's voices have been side-lined, familial abuse overlooked and women's experiences misappropriated 'to prop up their personal anti-Muslim agenda'.⁸⁹ Despite its obvious shortcomings, the SYUK report was cited uncritically in a recent parliamentary debate on 'grooming gangs'.⁹⁰

Driving anti-Muslim racism: the UK and international far Right

To understand the broader political context to the ‘grooming gangs’ discourse, it is important to consider the international far Right’s weaponisation of women’s rights, the role of the UK far Right and the ‘Islamophobia industry’.

How the international far Right is co-opting women’s rights

Central to pan-European and indeed global far-right narratives is the presentation of Muslims as a specific and urgent civilisational threat.⁹¹ Far-right propaganda commonly refers to the ‘Islamisation’ or ‘Islamification’ of Europe, or ‘Islamofascism’.⁹² The ‘war on terror’ helped mainstream such perspectives and normalise the use of secular and feminist discourses to inveigh against the supposedly increasing threat of Islam in Europe.⁹³ The anti-Muslim political climate cultivated by ‘Islamofascism’ proponents has helped fuel concerted campaigns against face veils (leading to full or partial bans in several European countries), concerns over the ‘Muslim birth rate’, frequent attacks on Muslim civil society groups and political activists, concocted outrage over the practice of halal slaughter and a persistently anti-Muslim ‘integrationism’ agenda.⁹⁴ This anti-Muslim climate has served as ideological justification for domestic and international ‘war on terror’ efforts – and the attendant wide-ranging human rights abuses – of which Muslims in Europe, the US and elsewhere bear the brunt.⁹⁵ A defining feature of European far-right propaganda, which has now seeped into mainstream liberal and some feminist discourse and is particularly important for this article, is the use of women’s rights to advocate and advance anti-Muslim sentiments.

A clear tendency has emerged for far-right, neo-nationalist parties – and groups and individuals affiliated with their cause – to present themselves as champions of women’s rights.⁹⁶ This phenomenon is apparent in various European countries and beyond, including the Nordic bloc, where societies are stereotyped as more tolerant and social democratic in their value systems. In the Nordics, as in the UK, serious sexual offences have been racialised and politicised.⁹⁷ For example, three high-profile cases in Finland were exploited to rail against immigration policy, Muslims and those regarded as ‘threatening others’.⁹⁸ These cases also demonstrate how nationalist and colonialist rhetoric serves to symbolise ‘their’ women as representing the honour and glory of a nation and further links women’s bodies with territory and notions of a ‘pure’ biological race.⁹⁹ Similar invocations are evident in other countries and contexts, including in France and Australia. For example, Dagistanli and Grewal contend that in public and political discourse in Australia, a series of rapes came to represent both the perceived danger of Muslim immigrants and their threat to ‘Australian values’: ‘the violation of ‘Australian girls’ became symbolic of a much larger threat to the nation’.¹⁰⁰

In her work on ‘femonationalism’,¹⁰¹ Farris contends that both nationalists and neoliberals frame Islam as ‘a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture’ and draw on gender equality to ‘advance xenophobic and racist politics’. Through case studies from the Netherlands and Italy, Farris explores the unlikely coalition of nationalists and feminists around an anti-Muslim agenda, demonstrating how some feminists and femocrats¹⁰² are complicit in campaigning that helps stigmatise Muslim men and which often also includes a broader anti-immigrant component. Such context helps situate and make sense of the contributions of prominent feminists in racialising ‘grooming gangs’: most notably the inputs of Sarah Champion MP, explored earlier in this article. Such interventions from individuals seen as feminists from the liberal ‘centre ground’ of politics are crucial in legitimising the far-right’s campaign against ‘grooming gangs’: serving to strengthen the brand of anti-Muslim racism positioned under the banner of gender equality.

The UK far-right and the ‘Islamophobia industry’

The EDL, the racist anti-Muslim street group founded by ‘Tommy Robinson’, enjoyed its greatest success and biggest mobilisations in the early 2010s. EDL demonstrations, often targeted at the UK’s Muslim communities, then regularly attracted thousands of participants. The EDL has since imploded, reportedly due to dwindling support and in-fighting.¹⁰³ As is common in far-right circles, however, various smaller, splinter groups have emerged to accommodate street-based fascist thugs. The remnants of the EDL, including groups such as ‘Yorkshire’s Finest’, have targeted Rotherham, which has experienced numerous far-right demonstrations in the aftermath of the ‘grooming gang’ scandals: over one particularly active period August 2014–September 2015, fourteen separate demonstrations took place.¹⁰⁴ One such group, the ‘Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA), organises almost exclusively against ‘Muslim grooming gangs’, under the guise of women’s rights and protecting (white) women and girls.¹⁰⁵ Notably, the DFLA add credence to their claims by using on their flyers the dodgy 84 per cent statistic from Quilliam and emphasising that even ‘left-wing media news outlets’ publicised it, implying it must therefore be true.¹⁰⁶ Another new group, ‘Justice for Women and Children’, is reportedly the UK’s first female-led far-right group. It was launched in Sunderland in the North East and claims to campaign against abusers and for victims regardless of ethnicity: yet, members and their close associates have attracted accusations of ‘long term associations with the far-right’.¹⁰⁷ Commenting on a BBC News’ investigation into ‘Justice for Women and Children’, Sarah Champion MP rather ironically and hypocritically condemned them for ‘using some of the most abhorrent abuse of children for their own agenda’. When ‘Tommy Robinson’ was tried for contempt of court (see previous section), Ezra Levant and Katie Hopkins attended in support: prominent far-right figures, notorious for their frequent anti-Muslim diatribes.¹⁰⁸ Further underlining the reach of powerful ‘special interest groups’ invested in furthering an anti-Muslim agenda, ‘Tommy Robinson’ was ‘reporting’ for far-right Canadian news website Rebel Media at the time of the offences. ‘Robinson’s’ work for Rebel Media was revealed as funded via a fellowship from US tech billionaire

Robert Shillman,¹⁰⁹ a board member of the notoriously anti-Muslim think-tank the David Horowitz Freedom Center. Giving a glimpse into a transatlantic web of dark money and influence,¹¹⁰ both the David Horowitz Freedom Center and Quilliam have received funds from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.¹¹¹ Scholars have referred to such groups as being part of an ‘Islamophobia industry’: transatlantic neoconservative actors and institutions, often funded by wealthy elites, which work to ‘manufacture’ fear of Islam and Muslims in order to influence political discourse and policy.¹¹²

Examining the impacts of racialising child sexual abuse

Although it is very difficult to pinpoint how racialised discourses contribute to specific outcomes (e.g. racist violence),¹¹³ a growing body of evidence suggests the fixation on ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ is making its effects felt locally, nationally and internationally. Here, we explore how it can skew responses to CSE/CSA, affect victims, fuel violent Islamophobia and translate into structural racism.

Increased attention to CSE but a heavily-skewed focus

Over the past decade, CSE has gone from a fairly marginal concern to being designated a ‘national threat’.¹¹⁴ Publicity, political exposure and outrage around ‘grooming gangs’ have helped drive considerable changes, including new enquiries and strategies,¹¹⁵ a revised definition, greater prioritisation and investment in improving responses and expanding the evidence-base. The number of recorded child sex offences in general has increased rapidly since 2012/13, reaching 63,000 across the UK in 2016/17.¹¹⁶ This uptick, driven particularly by non-recent cases, likely reflects increased awareness of CSE/CSA, greater willingness to report, improved understanding among professionals and better recording practices.¹¹⁷ The intersection between CSE and other harms is also increasingly recognised, including going missing, youth offending, human trafficking and child criminal exploitation.¹¹⁸ Once routinely dismissed as ‘streetwise’ and ‘consenting child prostitutes’,¹¹⁹ sexually exploited children now appear more widely recognised as victims of abuse.¹²⁰ Responding to attitudinal changes and calls to reduce victim-blaming,¹²¹ sexual offence legislation has been revised, replacing the stigmatising term ‘child prostitution’ with ‘sexual exploitation of children’. Although many such developments are clearly to be welcomed, improvements have come at a cost: the narrow lens on ‘grooming gangs’ detracts from the immense scale and diversity of abuse.

In 2016 alone, 6,687 offenders were convicted of CSA-related offences in England and Wales.¹²² These figures clearly dwarf the select handful of cases underpinning *The Times*’¹²³ and Quilliam’s¹²⁴ sensationalist claims of an epidemic: respectively just four and twenty-two convicted offenders per year for the whole UK.¹²⁵ The true epidemic here, of course, is CSA in general: an estimated 15–20 per cent of girls and 7–8 per cent of boys are sexually abused.¹²⁶ CSE/CSA occurs in numerous different contexts and involves diverse victims and offenders, many of whom are family

members or friends.¹²⁷ Beyond already debunked ‘evidence’ from *The Times*¹²⁸ and Quilliam,¹²⁹ claims of ethnic disproportionality in ‘grooming’ typically rest on small-scale reports¹³⁰ with obvious methodological shortcomings.¹³¹ Nevertheless, ethnicity-related results are often decontextualised and, stripped of vital caveats, that extensive missing data mean their findings are not reliable, let alone generalisable. In examining alleged ethnic disproportionality, wide-reaching national datasets with clearer and more consistent inclusion parameters are a better comparator. Although criminal justice data on ethnicity should always be treated cautiously (and data on religion are simply not collected as standard), Asians were notably *not* overrepresented among the approximately 172,000 men and 27,000 women convicted of sexual offences in England and Wales in 2016.¹³²

Erasing victims and survivors and neglecting their needs

The overwhelming focus on Asian men abusing white girls risks erasing other victims, neglecting their needs and overlooking other offenders.¹³³ Clearly demonstrating diversity in those affected by CSE, a study of over 9,000 CSE service-users in the UK found that nearly one-third was male and around one in five black or minority ethnicity (BME).¹³⁴ Mainstream services are reportedly geared towards white girls and overlook the needs of other (intersecting) groups like ethnic minorities, boys, LGBTQ+ children and those with disabilities, who can face particular challenges and barriers to disclosure, like additional stigma or fear of ‘shaming’ their families.¹³⁵

Despite extremely limited empirical research, evidence (some anecdotal) is gradually amassing that the existence, experiences and welfare of victims/survivors who deviate from now entrenched racial stereotypes can be neglected. For example, several prosecutions involving mostly white offenders attracted minimal media coverage compared to that reserved for ‘Asian sex gangs’: as if their abuses somehow mattered less.¹³⁶ The Jay (2014) report received intense publicity for its (methodologically dubious¹³⁷) estimate that 1,400 children were abused in Rotherham 1997–2013, mostly by groups of Pakistani-heritage offenders. BME victims were almost entirely overlooked in the coverage.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, Quilliam’s report literally whitewashed out BME victims in its sample through untrue and insulting claims that all victims were white.¹³⁹ ‘Grooming gangs’ are also a hot topic on social media, where numerous people have spoken informally about feeling erased and invalidated because their abuse did not confirm to racial stereotypes. The following lines from one survivor’s poem exemplify this sense of erasure:

I’m a victim of child abuse by white working class men,
You dismiss it because you look just like them ...
Voices erased to focus solely on one method of abuse
Now deceptive propaganda for third-party use¹⁴⁰

Survivors have spoken out against their and others’ experiences being weaponised for political gain, particularly by the far Right which uses ‘them as a weapon for racism

just the same way they were used for sex by their abusers' (@KateElysiaNWO, author).¹⁴¹ Some report experiencing verbal abuse as a result:

Tommy [Robinson] doesn't support the cause I fight for, he peddles hate and right wing extremism in my opinion... [@HollyArcher_CSE, author and support worker]¹⁴²

...The amount of abuse I've had from them for not fitting the agenda/supporting TR [Tommy Robinson] is unbelievable (they were ok talking about my story until they realised I wasn't Abused only by Muslims – then suddenly they felt my kids needed throwing in the English Channel) [@MsCaitSpencer, author]¹⁴³

Further pushback was evident in an open letter from a group of survivors fed up with repeated far-right marches in Rotherham.¹⁴⁴ Published on the front page of a local newspaper, it called for the marches to be banned and detailed the anxiety and trauma caused, including 'horrific memories' stirred and frustration at abuse being exploited to fuel 'hatred and fear'.¹⁴⁵ The far-right, UKIP included, have faced further accusations of co-opting the abused to promote their narrative, trying to 'infiltrate' support groups and even launching an 'anti-grooming helpline'¹⁴⁶ that raises obvious concerns from a safeguarding and data protection perspective.¹⁴⁷ For example, peer-support group Shatter Boys was reportedly approached by senior UKIP figures promising introductions to multi-millionaire donors, leading founder Danny Wolstencroft to state, 'What they're doing basically is grooming survivor groups and survivors of abuse. I think their fight is about Islam'.¹⁴⁸ Of course, CSE survivors are not a homogeneous group and some survivors and their families *have* tilted towards the far Right, for example sharing far-right propaganda on social media, speaking at rallies or collaborating on 'anti-grooming' initiatives.¹⁴⁹ This troubling development highlights how the cynical and populist far Right is able to instrumentalise its anti-Muslim agenda to gain support from unlikely sources.

Fuelling anti-Muslim hostility and violent Islamophobia

The global far Right has long indulged in anti-Muslim propaganda, including through the racialisation of sexual abuse (see previous section). In diatribes posted online before his massacre of seventy-seven people in Norway in 2011, Anders Breivik railed against Islam, multiculturalism and the rape of 'hundreds of European women'.¹⁵⁰ The perpetrator of the most recent far-right massacre killed fifty-two Muslims as they prayed in mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. In specific reference to 'grooming gangs', his ammunition was inscribed 'For Rotherham', visible in images uploaded online before the attack and the live-streamed atrocities themselves.¹⁵¹ His rambling 'manifesto' also featured two pages on how 'invading forces' were raping 'European women', drawing extensively on UK CSE cases.¹⁵² Darren Osborne, who killed a Muslim prayer-goer and injured several more in the Finsbury Park mosque terror attack in 2017, was reportedly 'obsessed with Muslims,

grooming gangs, and terrorism’ and, according to his former partner, suddenly started accusing all Muslims of ‘raping children and being capable of blowing people up’.¹⁵³ Osborne’s online searches and interactions included far-right group Britain First and ‘Tommy Robinson’.¹⁵⁴

More generally, far-right activity around ‘grooming gangs’ has focused on towns in England’s North and Midlands, like Rochdale, Rotherham and, increasingly, Telford: home to high-profile convictions.¹⁵⁵ As highlighted previously, extensive marches targeting Muslim communities have taken place, particularly in Rotherham. Attempts to ban the marches have failed and local residents, including Muslims, trade unionists, anti-fascists and even abuse survivors have spoken out against their detrimental effects.¹⁵⁶ Anti-Muslim attacks in Rotherham have risen, local communities have been held collectively responsible for the crimes of individuals, young Muslim children report being bullied as ‘groomers’ and anti-Muslim opinions published as letters in the local press highlight some ways in which the local racial landscape seems radically transformed by the racialisation of the ‘grooming gang’ cases.¹⁵⁷ A recent study by Britton¹⁵⁸ has detailed how Muslim men in Rotherham have developed strategies with which to navigate everyday instances of racism brought on by the racialisation of the CSE scandal.

Although so-called ‘grooming gang’ cases have undoubtedly involved horrific abuses,¹⁵⁹ it is clear overall that a disproportionate, politicised and racialised panic has emerged, in its most extreme forms helping ‘justify’ racist murders: alongside the New Zealand massacre just discussed, at the local level an elderly Muslim man and Rotherham resident Mushin Ahmed was beaten to death by two of his white neighbours whilst repeatedly being called a ‘Paki’ and a ‘groomer’. Eighty-one-year-old grandfather Ahmed was attacked whilst walking to his local mosque; he was kicked so hard a trainer imprint was left on his face and it was determined that he was targeted ‘for no better reason than Mr Ahmed was Asian’.¹⁶⁰ As we have explored in this article, the term ‘groomer’ has developed to become a potent racial signifier and term of racist abuse directed squarely at those perceived to be Muslim.¹⁶¹

Racial stereotypes can translate into structural racism

Although targeted research is needed, there is an obvious risk that racial stereotypes around ‘grooming’ will translate into structural racism and fuel discrimination across safeguarding and criminal justice responses.¹⁶² Indeed, the Drew Review of South Yorkshire Police’s responses to CSE emphasised the dangers of ‘too narrow a working definition’ of CSE and concluded that an undue focus on ‘red light areas ... and gangs of men principally of Pakistani heritage led not only the force but also probably the whole partnership to look for signs of exploitation in the wrong places’.¹⁶³ Focusing on Asian offenders may lead to visibility and institutional biases, potentially affecting who is investigated, arrested and prosecuted and skewing law enforcement data. The potential for discrimination at court cannot be ruled out either, although large-scale analysis of court verdicts suggested juries do *not* racially

discriminate against sexual offence defendants.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, that research predates widespread racial stereotypes of ‘grooming gangs’ and future case simulation with juries might usefully focus on this particular issue.

Since 2016, there has been a compulsory CSE ‘flag’ for police recorded crime data.¹⁶⁵ Although framed as a step towards improved data collection and analysis, to be most useful such flags should be interpreted and applied consistently. Here, there is an obvious risk that racial stereotyping fuels circular ‘proof’ of supposed disproportionality. Boundary issues around CSE are a notorious concern, with some professionals worrying that the so-called “‘grooming and pimping model” has come to define CSE’.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the National Crime Agency (NCA) has reportedly identified such inconsistencies ‘in reviewing and flagging CSE and CSA’ that it prefers to use the umbrella term ‘child sexual exploitation and abuse’ instead.¹⁶⁷

Differential investment could also exacerbate the perceived threat of ‘grooming gangs’. An obvious example is Operation Stovewood: the UK’s largest CSE investigation, led by the NCA with a projected total cost of around £90 million by 2024.¹⁶⁸ Initiated in response to the Jay Report, it focuses on abuse in Rotherham 1997–2013 and has resulted in twenty convictions, many conforming to racial stereotypes. Although too limited in number to affect national statistics greatly, these high-profile prosecutions may disproportionately influence public perceptions.

Articulating alternatives and moving towards anti-racist feminist responses

In this section, we consider alternative ways of understanding and responding to CSE/CSA and counter-fixes to the misleading and harmful ‘grooming gangs’ narrative. We also sketch out how a commitment to anti-racist feminism could drive future research, policy and practice, simultaneously prioritising and tackling serious sexual violence while rejecting attempts to racialise the issues and demonise minority communities.

First, too few credible experts in the child protection space have publicly challenged the racialisation of CSE.¹⁶⁹ More critical engagement with the issue of inaccurate and harmful racial stereotyping is needed from NGOs, policy-makers, practitioners and academics with expertise around child sexual abuse and its prevention. Since they operate from a position of influence and expertise, disengagement around racial stereotyping risks turning into complicity.

Second, a more robust, evidence-informed approach to tackling CSA is evidently needed. Although better data cannot prevent abuse *per se*, they are crucial in monitoring patterns and trends, informing prioritisation, identifying levers for intervention and evaluating counter-measures. Calls for a national CSA prevalence survey are therefore welcome.¹⁷⁰ Due to the racialisation of CSE and its vague and inconsistent parameters,¹⁷¹ there are discussions to be had as to whether the term has outlived its usefulness and should be abandoned in favour of CSA: the more neutral,

inclusive and clearly-defined term. Note that inclusivity does not preclude focusing specific analyses or interventions on specific issues: disaggregation, precision and context-specificity are vital in tackling crimes. Nevertheless, data and their collection are not neutral and any categorisation or typologies must be theoretically and methodologically solid and not built up around racial stereotypes.

Third, the fixation on the ‘uniquely dangerous masculinities of Muslim men’¹⁷² encourages hyper-simplistic and inaccurate understandings of how and why abuse occurs. Rates of CSA are high across different countries and groups, undermining the notion that certain groups are inherently more abusive than others.¹⁷³ Although traditionally approached through the lens of individual psychopathology, decades of research into CSA show that offenders are remarkably heterogeneous and there are few meaningful individual-level predictors.¹⁷⁴ Recognition is growing – albeit not yet mainstream – that CSA, like any human behaviour, results from an *interaction* between individuals and their environments.¹⁷⁵ Although people differ in their *propensity* to offend, their *opportunities* to do so are moderated by a whole host of factors, among them demographic, familial, cultural, occupational, institutional and structural considerations.¹⁷⁶ These intersecting factors help explain why certain groups can be differentially represented in certain offending contexts, without meaning factors like ethnicity (or indeed religion) are in themselves causal. An increased focus on opportunities also opens up new avenues to intervention, such as contextual safeguarding.¹⁷⁷ An approach to understanding and tackling harm outside the family, contextual safeguarding considers the immediate physical and social environments in which harm occurs and how places and practices might be modified to reduce risk and build resilience. Greater adoption of such approaches would help shift away from generic ‘prevention’ through one-size-fits-all awareness-raising or education at one end of the spectrum and prosecution at the other. Although prosecution is important – not least symbolically – it comes too late when harm is already done, has limited deterrent effect and makes little overall dent in crime.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, CSA is clearly not something for the police alone to tackle: other parties (e.g. health, social care, education, charities, community groups, families) have vital roles to play and their contributions must be encouraged.

Fourth, the misapprehension that ‘grooming gangs’ flourished primarily due to ‘political correctness’ must be tackled. Decrying political correctness (usually in the context of racialised minorities) is common among right-wing and far-right commentators but detracts from broader systemic issues that require attention.¹⁷⁹ Responses to CSE in general have suffered widespread and well-documented problems.¹⁸⁰ Before interest in ‘grooming gangs’ exploded, CSE was probably fairly easy to ignore because of low reporting levels, limited understanding, low prioritisation and victims’ lack of social capital. Long-standing concerns existed that police and particularly prosecutors were reluctant to pursue cases for fear victims would not make credible witnesses.¹⁸¹ Moreover, unsympathetic attitudes to sexually exploited children likely reflect broader prejudices around who constitutes a credible and ‘deserving’ victim.¹⁸² Remember too that rape myths and victim blaming are not

confined to criminal justice and child protection professionals: they are common among the general public.¹⁸³

Fifth, CSE can be challenging and costly to investigate and prosecute. Years of austerity measures have hit criminal justice agencies hard,¹⁸⁴ meaning they may not be adequately resourced, trained and incentivised to respond as effectively as possible to sexual offences. Police and prosecutors involved in major CSE cases indeed described them as unusually complex and resource-intensive.¹⁸⁵ They also flagged tensions with performance management culture, stating for example that the extent of victim care ‘just doesn’t match up against any [policing] performance indicators’ or that pursuing difficult cases conflicts with ‘serious performance pressure’ in the CPS to win as many sexual offence cases as possible.¹⁸⁶ Changes in policy and top-down mandates around CSE must be matched by adequate resourcing and proper accommodation of its complexities. Since law enforcement-led approaches play a central role at present, they should be improved wherever possible. In making the above recommendations, we acknowledge that ‘women of color, immigrant, queer, transgender, poor, and other marginalized women are often further brutalized – rather than protected – by the police’.¹⁸⁷ The role and indeed capacity of police and the criminal justice system to prevent sexual violence have long been called into question by abolitionists and other campaigners, drawing upon a history of state and institutional failure in dealing with violence against women and girls (VAWG).¹⁸⁸ One legacy of such failures has been the attempts by some groups to develop grassroots, community-based approaches to dealing with sexual violence that directly challenge approaches (described as ‘dominant feminisms’) that readily invoke the tools of the ‘carceral state’.¹⁸⁹ As Phipps argues, it is women of colour who have long been doing this largely unacknowledged intersectional work at the grassroots: ‘These activists understand that single-issue politics is not resistance, that feminism which does not centre the most marginalised is not fit for purpose’.¹⁹⁰ We recognise the limits of police-led approaches (practically and politically) in addressing CSA and call for greater investment in the funding of specialist VAWG services – particularly those developed for and led by marginalised groups.

The sixth issue then, especially important when considering alternative approaches rooted in a commitment to anti-racist feminism, is that the impacts of austerity are also evident in the chronic underfunding of support services for victims and survivors of sexual offences. In Rotherham, the focus of so much attention, counselling services are reportedly extremely oversubscribed with waiting times averaging seven months.¹⁹¹ The government’s past and proposed spending on sexual offence support services¹⁹² is dwarfed by the outlay on figurehead inquiries and investigations. For example, the total funding for rape crisis services across England and Wales was just £7.2 million in 2018/19,¹⁹³ compared with Operation Stovewood’s budget of £12 million.¹⁹⁴ We reject Boris Johnson’s outrageous characterisation of investigations into non-recent child sexual abuse as ‘spaffing’ money.¹⁹⁵ There are, however, difficult conversations to be had about how finite funds can be spent most effectively for current, past and future victims. Specialist CSE services for BME victims are

reportedly particularly underfunded.¹⁹⁶ Despite calls for more inclusive responses,¹⁹⁷ a recent review found ‘little evidence about how sexual violence interventions in the UK accommodate diversity or pay attention to issues of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality or disability’.¹⁹⁸ Looking beyond CSE to the broader VAWG sector, Imkaan’s recent report is a damning indictment of chronic underfunding of long-established, specialist services. Imkaan, the UK’s only second-tier organisation dedicated to addressing violence against BME women, describes BME VAWG services as,

‘the poor relation’ of the wider ending VAWG movement. The sector has a long history of underfunding and political marginalisation, which for individual organisations has impacted their survival and their ability to sustain the vital work that they do.¹⁹⁹

Shortfalls in funding for VAWG services require urgent redress, particularly where unique, specialist services for BME clients are concerned. Spending is often directed towards generic, cheaper (and, more often than not, white-led) organisations at the expense of specialist BME services, creating not just an inequality of funding but an inequality of services that deprives minorities of the support they need.²⁰⁰

Finally, the ‘grooming gangs’ discourse should be addressed by a genuine engagement with anti-racist feminism perspectives. Racial stereotyping has undoubtedly led to fractures within anti-racist and feminist movements, which are themselves marked by attempts by Black and Asian women to organise on their own terms against sexual abuse, racism and patriarchy.²⁰¹ It also affects the capacity of minority groups to discuss preventing sexual abuse without fuelling racist stereotyping and scapegoating.²⁰² As Gopal argues, contradictions within activist communities need to be confronted too since ‘[i]t is, of course, perfectly possible to be racist in the name of feminism or misogynist while laying claim to antiracism’.²⁰³ Backlash around Sarah Champion’s outrageous article for *The Sun* (discussed earlier) demonstrated that some activists, politicians and the wider public are at least alert and responsive to attempts to whip up racist animosity against Muslim minorities. The processes of racialisation examined in this article *obscure* from view institutional failures, contemptible attitudes towards victims, many of them working-class girls and young women, and a reluctance to acknowledge that austerity-related cuts have decimated services dedicated to tackling sexual abuse and violence.²⁰⁴ Culturalist, essentialist explanations of why Muslim men sexually abuse children must be rejected. Reliant on multitudinous racial stereotypes, they exceptionalise sexual abuse as the preserve of particular communities rather than acknowledging it is an everyday problem across British society. As Grewal notes, ‘Muslim men are not considered sufficiently developed individuals who *could* actively decide on their actions. They are completely at the mercy of their culture, which is itself understood as one based upon violence against women, misogyny and lack of respect for individual autonomy’.²⁰⁵ Culturalist understandings thus impede genuine work to tackle sexual

violence by ‘justifying’ ‘initiatives that have to do more with teaching ‘them’ how to behave than it does any meaningful anti-violence objective.’²⁰⁶

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- ⁵⁶ The UK Independence Party (UKIP) was originally set up by disaffected Conservatives including Nigel Farage as a home for anti-immigrant Eurosceptics. Under Gerard Batten, its leader from April 2018 to June 2019, it morphed from right-wing to far-right and today campaigns on a largely anti-Muslim platform. P. Walker, ‘Tommy Robinson appointed as Ukip’s “grooming gangs adviser”’, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2018, access at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/nov/22/tommy-robinson-ukip-grooming-gangs-adviser>.
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- ⁶² H. Rafiq, and M. Adil, *Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation: Dissecting “Grooming Gangs”*. (London: Quilliam, 2017). In this and the following paragraphs, page references to the report are given in the text.
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- ⁶⁴ The organisation released a commentary and a letter from their IT company vehemently denying changes (available at: <http://journal.quilliaminternational.com/2018/11/10/letter-from-pioneer-solutions/>), but the metadata on the two different versions of the report expose the lies.
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- ⁶⁷ No workable research definition was provided and three different descriptors were used (each of which would have a different remit): ‘grooming gang’ offences’, ‘group-based localised street grooming of young girls’ and ‘all group child-sex offences’.
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