



UNMASKING THE MYTH:

THE FALLACY OF THE

“MUSLIM/ASIAN

GROOMING GANGS”

NARRATIVE

mend

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Introduction

The trauma endured by victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE) is profound and immeasurable. These young people face unimaginable pain, and any meaningful discussion about CSE must prioritise their well-being and experiences. However, the growing trend of racialising the issue, often fuelled by prominent figures and politicians, undermines efforts to protect vulnerable children. By framing CSE as a crime predominantly committed by South Asian or Muslim men, this harmful narrative not only deepens societal divisions and perpetuates Islamophobia, but distracts from the real focus of supporting and safeguarding victims, while doing a great disservice to both them and our communities.

In recent decades, several high-profile cases from around the world have served to highlight the continued prevalence of child sexual exploitation (CSE). These include cases from a range of contexts, including Hollywood, the socio-political elite and small towns and cities. However specifically in the UK context, for the better part of a decade, the portrayal of Muslim or Asian grooming gangs has been a recurrent theme in media narratives concerning CSE. Despite consistent challenges from academic experts disputing the highly dubious research used to frame the issue in such terms¹, this narrative has persisted, solidifying its presence through the endorsements of politicians, journalists and think tanks.

In October 2018, responding to reports of 20 men arrested in Huddersfield as part of a grooming ring targeting young girls, the former Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, took to Twitter to condemn what he called "sick, Asian paedophiles"². This pronouncement echoed the prevailing narrative and helped to reinforce racially-charged allegations made by figures such as MP for Rotherham, Sarah Champion, who asserted that "Britain has a problem with British

Pakistani men raping and exploiting white girls"³. The confidence of those making such contestable claims was likely fed the year prior, when a now-defunct think tank, The Quilliam Foundation, asserted in a report that Asian men accounted for 84% of grooming gang attacks since 2005⁴. Quilliam's research, whose central claims and methodology had long been called into question anyway, was then significantly undermined in 2020 when the Home Office released a report highlighting that most child sexual abuse gangs are, in fact, composed of white men under the age of 30, dispelling the myth that grooming gangs are predominantly made up of Asian/Muslim men.⁵

Nevertheless, in April 2023, then-Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, announced her intention to crack down on CSE. Yet, in doing so, Ms Braverman made her own contribution to the fiction that grooming gangs are the unique product of Asian and/or Muslim communities by asserting in an article for The Mail on Sunday that, "almost all" of those involved in grooming gangs are "Pakistani men"⁶. Ms Braverman made this allegation despite the fact that it had already been comprehensively refuted by Home Office research, which, as noted above, showed that most CSE offenders are white men⁷. In fact, the Home Office's research concluded that, "it is not possible to draw any conclusions as to whether some ethnicities have a greater involvement in group-based offending compared with others"⁸.

Despite the fact that attempts to frame CSE as uniquely the product of Asian/Muslim grooming gangs are not justified by the available quantitative data, the 'grooming gangs trope' continues to be recycled by politicians. Then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak himself in mid-2023 made the oft-repeated argument, which lacks any serious evidential basis, that the activities of Asian/Muslim grooming gangs

1 Ella Cockbain and Waqas Tufail. 2020. "Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate: Challenging the Harms of the 'Muslim Grooming Gangs' Narrative". Institute of Race Relations. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10087386/7/Cockbain_0306396819895727.pdf

2 Mohdin, Aamna. 2018. "Sajid Javid Lambasted For 'Asian Paedophiles' Tweet". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/oct/20/sajid-javid-lambasted-for-asian-paedophiles-tweet-huddersfield>.

3 "Rochdale Detective Backs MP Who Quit Over Rape Comments | ITV News". 2017. *ITV News*.

<https://www.itv.com/news/granada/2017-08-21/rochdale-scandal-detective-backs-mp-who-quit-over-rape-comments>.

4 Kenan Malik. 2018. "We're Told 84% Of Grooming Gangs Are Asian. But Where's The Evidence?." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/11/84-per-cent-of-grooming-gangs-are-asians-we-dont-know-if-that-figure-is-right>.

5 Home Office. 2020. "Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation Characteristics Of Offending," https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/944206/Group-based_CSE_Paper.pdf.

6 Suella Braverman. 2023. "My Mission to Ensure There Really is no Hiding Place for the Evil Gangs Grooming Our Vulnerable Young Girls". Daily Mail UK: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-11928629/SUELLA-BRAVERMAN-mission-ensure-really-no-hiding-place-gangs-grooming-young-girls.html>

7 "MEND Statement: Suella Braverman and the 'Pakistani Grooming Gangs' Narrative," Muslim Engagement and Development, April 6, 2023, <https://www.mend.org.uk/mend-statement-suella-braverman-and-the-pakistani-grooming-gangs-narrative/>.

8 "Characteristics of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation in the Community: Literature Review (Accessible Version)," GOV.UK, October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-characteristics-of-offending/characteristics-of-group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-in-the-community-literature-review-accessible-version>.

are being overlooked because of institutional “political correctness”⁹. Even the government’s own 2021 CSE strategy paper attributes increasing levels of abuse to record levels of online activity, not to networks of grooming gangs¹⁰. Claims that grooming gangs are disproportionately an Asian/Muslim problem have long permeated media and public discourse, and contribute to the propagation of Islamophobic stereotypes that exacerbate the hostile environment faced by Muslims and other minorities in Britain. In the end, this serves only to undermine the social cohesion needed to confront the affliction of CSE, not strengthen it. Ultimately, it is crucial that in addressing this issue the focus remains squarely on the victims, ensuring their needs, voices and protection are at the heart of any conversation or action.

Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy

2021



⁹ “Rishi Sunak Criticises Political Correctness Over Grooming Gangs.” BBC News, April 3, 2023: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-65160429#>

¹⁰ “Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy Policy Paper.” UK GOV, January 22 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-child-sexual-abuse-strategy>

Braverman's claim about ethnicity of grooming gangs was false, regulator rules

Mail on Sunday issues correction over opinion piece by home secretary claiming 'almost all' child grooming gangs were British-Pakistani

This report identified several issues with the "Asian Grooming Gangs" narrative:

Irrelevance of Race or Religion:

The narrative incorrectly links ethnicity and religion to criminal behaviour without substantive evidence.

A Biased and Racialised Concept:

The narrative is inherently biased and racialised, distorting the understanding of CSE by focusing on specific ethnic or religious groups.

The Flawed Quilliam Report:

The credibility of the Quilliam report, which asserted a significant prevalence of Asian men in grooming gangs, is questionable.

Fuels Far Right and Anti-Ethnic Minority Sentiments:

The narrative fuels far-right and anti-ethnic minority sentiments, further polarising societal attitudes, particularly against Muslims and Asians.

Perpetuation of Islamophobic Tropes:

The narrative contributes to the perpetuation of Islamophobic stereotypes, deepening prejudices against Muslims and Asian, including those perceived to be Muslim.

Harmful to the Victims:

By diverting attention and resources away from the actual perpetrators, the narrative is harmful to the genuine victims of CSE.

The subsequent pages expound upon the problematic and detrimental aspects of the so-called "Muslim/Asian grooming gangs" narrative.

To conclude, the report then provides six core policy recommendations which can help to foster a more evidence-based, and at the same time less racially-charged, national conversation about the scourge of CSE.

Irrelevance of Race or Religion

Back in April 2023, the Network of Sikh Organisations, alongside other controversial Sikh and Hindu organisations, published a joint open letter to the then-Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, endorsing her usage of the contentious phrase “Pakistani grooming gangs”¹¹. A central theme of the letter revolved around a narrative which alleged that Pakistani Muslims groom white, Sikh and Hindu girls because they are non-Muslim. In other words, it was claimed that this predatory behaviour was religiously motivated.¹² However, such a narrative lacks any credible evidence and, as shall be shown throughout this report, is predicated mainly on a speculative, Islamophobic narrative regarding CSE. As far as victims of grooming gangs are concerned, these are also not exclusively non-Muslim. Highlighting this, a detailed report by the Muslim Women’s Network has highlighted the often-overlooked cases of CSE involving Muslim victims, refuting the narrative that victims are always, or even mostly, non-Muslim¹³. The above-mentioned letter specifically referenced a case in Leicester in which a Sikh girl was abused by what the coalition of Sikh and Hindu groups described in a previous statement as “men with mainly Muslim names” above a restaurant called the Moghul Durbar¹⁴. However, the letter failed to disclose that two of the men convicted had South Asian, non-Muslim sounding names: Bharat Modhwadia and Chandresh Mistry. Had this information been revealed, the fundamental assertion of the letter - that gangs of exclusively Muslim men were targeting non-Muslim girls - for the very reason that they were non-Muslim, would have been undermined¹⁵.

Ultimately, phrases like “Asian grooming gangs” or “Muslim grooming gangs” are flawed because the role of ethnicity has been shown to be insignificant. Research has demonstrated that, in determining whether an individual would be likely to participate in grooming practices, the ethnic origin of the perpetrators is not a key variable¹⁶. Almost all of those involved in grooming gangs were men, making gender the most distinguishing characteristic of the perpetrators. Rather than casting Asians or Muslims as problematic subjects, it makes more sense to reframe concerns around grooming gangs through a lens that critiques sexism and patriarchy in British society. The use of problematic phrases like “Asian” or “Muslim” to qualify the term “grooming gang” can give rise to the false belief that Asian or Muslim men are somehow more likely to assault women and are, as such, a threat to wider society. This perpetuates orientalist tropes that cast Muslim men as irrational, violent, and barbarous, while framing White women as innocent, powerless, and at the mercy of dangerous ‘foreign’ attackers. Such tropes are amplified by far-right populists and have been used to vilify Muslim communities, not least of all by figures like the notorious Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, aka Tommy Robinson¹⁷. One danger that often goes unrecognised is that this can leave girls who have been victimised by non-Asian/Muslim men feeling as if their experiences are somehow invalid because they do not fit the racialised narrative that has been given mainstream validation¹⁸. In fact, we already know that prosecutions of white offenders can sometimes attract less media coverage than those of an Asian/Muslim background¹⁹. Racialising CSE by associating grooming gangs with Muslim or Pakistani men risks obscuring the true nature of the problem and hindering justice for all victims, regardless of their race or religion.

11 “MEND Statement on the Open Letter by Sikh and Hindu Organisations: High on Prejudice, Low on Evidence.” Muslim Engagement and Development, April 20, 2023, <https://www.mend.org.uk/mend-statement-on-the-open-letter-by-sikh-and-hindu-organisations-high-on-prejudice-low-on-evidence/>.

12 Ibid.

13 *Unheard Voices* (Muslim Women’s Network, September 2013), https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/UnheardVoices.pdf.

14 “MEND Statement on the Open Letter by Sikh and Hindu Organisations: High on Prejudice, Low on Evidence.” Muslim Engagement and Development, April 20, 2023, <https://www.mend.org.uk/mend-statement-on-the-open-letter-by-sikh-and-hindu-organisations-high-on-prejudice-low-on-evidence/>.

15 Ibid.

16 “Characteristics of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation in the Community: Literature Review (Accessible Version),” GOV.UK, October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-characteristics-of-offending/characteristics-of-group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-in-the-community-literature-review-accessible-version>.

17 “Tommy Robinson is a Hypocrite When it Comes to Opposing Child Sexual Exploitation.” January 2022. Hope Not Hate, <https://hopenot-hate.org.uk/2022/01/11/tommy-robinson-is-a-hypocrite-when-it-comes-to-opposing-child-sexual-exploitation/>

18 Cockbain, Ella. 2019. “When Bad Evidence Is Worse Than No Evidence: Quilliam’s “Grooming Gangs” Report And Its Legacy - Policing Insight.” Policing Insight. <https://policinginsight.com/features/analysis/when-bad-evidence-is-worse-than-no-evidence-quilliams-grooming-gangs-report-and-its-legacy/>.

19 Joseph Harker. July 22, 2012. “This is How Racism Takes Root.” The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/22/how-racism-takes-root>



Image source: flickr.com/photos/62954923@N03

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that high-profile instances of grooming gangs consisting largely of men of South Asian ethnicity have happened in places like Rotherham, Rochdale and Telford. Moreover, some studies have shown Asian men to be over-represented in grooming incidents, whilst others have shown them to be underrepresented. In 2012, the Children's Commissioner for England identified 1,514 child grooming cases in the UK.²⁰ Of these, 545 (36%) were of White ethnicity and 415 (27.4%) were Asian, of which 35 (2%) were Pakistani heritage²¹. However, according to police data gathered by the Children's Commissioner for England from the period of April 2013 to March 2014 provided by 19 police forces, the ethnicity of nearly 4,000 offenders was identified. 1,200 of whom were involved in group-based CSE. These data found that 42% were White or White British, 17% were Black or Black British, 14% were Asian or Asian British, and 4% had another ethnicity²². Considering that the Asian/British Asian demographic in England and Wales makes up approximately 9% of the overall population (2.7% of whom are of Pakistani origin)²³, and Muslims 6.5%²⁴, it would appear that CSE groups from the Asian/Asian British ethnic backgrounds are somewhat overrepresented in the data relative to their population size.

However, we must also consider that CSE groups made up of white perpetrators, which it must be stressed make up the aggregate majority, operate differently than those of South Asian ethnicity. Experts claim that white men operating as part of a group tend to do their offending alone, then sharing victims' details with group members. South Asian offenders on the other hand offend as a group, making them more easily detectable, and also more attractive to newspaper editors looking for sensationalist 'front page' picture²⁵.

However, other data breakdowns have shown that relative to the general population, Asian men were in fact underrepresented (at 4%) among the roughly 6,200 defendants prosecuted in 2015/16 for sexual offences flagged as related to child abuse²⁶. If such data is accurate, it would at the very least throw into question the notion that South Asians are over-represented in CSE gang cases, therefore problematising the Asian grooming gangs stereotype. Further underscoring this point, the Home Office concluded in its 2020 report that, "it is not possible to draw any conclusions as to whether some ethnicities have a greater involvement in group-based offending compared with others"²⁷.

20 Children's Commissioner. 2012. "The Office Of The Children's Commissioner's Inquiry Into Child Sexual Exploitation In Gangs And Groups." <https://static.lgfl.net/LgflNet/downloads/online-safety/LGFL-OS-Research-Archive-2012-Childrens-Commissioner-CSE.pdf>.

21 Ibid.

22 "Characteristics of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation in the Community: Literature Review (Accessible Version)." GOV.UK, October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-characteristics-of-offending/characteristics-of-group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-in-the-community-literature-review-accessible-version>.

23 Ethnic Group, England and Wales: Census 2021. GOV.UK, November 29 2022:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021>

24 Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021. GOV.UK, November 29 2022:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>

25 Is Grooming Children For Sex A Disproportionately Asian Crime?" 2018. *The Economist*.

<https://www.economist.com/britain/2018/10/27/is-grooming-children-for-sex-a-disproportionately-asian-crime>.

26 "What Do We Know About The Ethnicity Of People Involved In Sexual Offences Against Children? – Full Fact". 2017. *Full Fact*.

<https://fullfact.org/crime/what-do-we-know-about-ethnicity-people-involved-sexual-offences-against-children/>.

27 "Characteristics of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation in the Community: Literature Review (Accessible Version)." GOV.UK, October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-characteristics-of-offending/characteristics-of-group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-in-the-community-literature-review-accessible-version>.

Since then, several inquiries and reviews have consistently confirmed that race and religion are irrelevant to the crime of CSE. The most recent research, published in 2024 by the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, found that 88% of defendants charged with CSE offences were White, while just 2% were Pakistani.²⁸

The report provided a detailed breakdown of defendant characteristics, with ethnicity data available for 74% of cases. White British defendants were significantly overrepresented, accounting for a higher proportion than in the general population. This contrast directly challenges the racialised narrative promoted by far-right figures and some right-wing politicians, who have falsely portrayed CSE as primarily a Pakistani/Muslim issue. The evidence decisively refutes claims that CSE is disproportionately committed by members of specific communities, emphasising that it is a crime rooted in abuse and exploitation, not race or religion.

Those who have pushed this racist narrative are not motivated by a genuine desire to protect victims. CSE is a horrific crime that requires a focus on justice for victims and the implementation of effective safeguards. Shifting the focus to the ethnicity or religion of perpetrators diverts attention from the systemic failures and practical solutions needed to protect victims and prevent future abuse.



28. 'Child Sexual Abuse in 2022/23: Trends in Official Data', Feb 2024, Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, p. 38, <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/02/Trends-in-Offical-Data-2022-23-FINAL.pdf>

The Flawed Quilliam Report

In 2017, a self-styled counter-extremism think tank called The Quilliam Foundation released a report into Grooming Gangs, titled Group Based Child Sexual Exploitation – Dissecting Grooming Gangs. The report concluded that Asian men carried out 84% of grooming incidents, a statistic which was subsequently circulated by numerous news outlets, as shown below. However, academic investigation into Quilliam's claims revealed that the report had fatal methodological flaws²⁹. In particular, a searing academic critique of the work was published by Dr Ella Cockbain, who described it as "a case study in bad science" which makes large, sweeping claims based on a tiny sub-sample of case studies³⁰. She also pointed out that, despite seeking clarification, Quilliam failed to respond to the apparent problems with the work or the charge that it was used to "distort understanding, influence decisions & fuel hate," further undermining its credibility³¹. With her colleague, Dr Waqas Tufail, Dr Cockbain subject Quilliam's report to further academic scrutiny in a peer-reviewed article, where she described it as "drivel" and "deeply misleading"³². The report was then further criticised in October 2020 when the Home Office carried out a review into CSE, stating that:

"Research by Quilliam asserted that 84% of 264 offenders convicted for grooming gang offences between 2005 and 2017 were Asian... This figure of 84% has been widely repeated as academic evidence for an extreme over-representation of Asian offenders despite a lack of clarity about sampling and data analysis methods... These findings are therefore not suitable for drawing conclusions about the ethnicity of group-based CSE offenders."³³

Although it is difficult to define the motive behind Quilliam's inaccurate research, there is little doubt that by perpetuating a narrative that heavily implicates Asian men in grooming incidents, Quilliam inevitably contributed to the rise of the grooming gangs trope surrounding Asian and Muslim men. The case of Quilliam provides an enduring lesson about how narratives around CSE can be misdirected by factually inaccurate research that people may mistaken as being reliable due to it being published by a seemingly reputable organisation.



29 Spooner, J., and J. Stubbs. 2018. "Grooming Gangs: Quilliam & The Myth Of The 84 Percent." *Medium*. https://medium.com/@Reg_Left_Media/grooming-gangs-quilliam-the-myth-of-the-84-percent-cc834b57fcf3.

30 Cockbain, Ella. 2019. "When Bad Evidence Is Worse Than No Evidence: Quilliam's "Grooming Gangs" Report And Its Legacy - Policing Insight". *Policing Insight*. <https://policinginsight.com/features/analysis/when-bad-evidence-is-worse-than-no-evidence-quilliams-grooming-gangs-report-and-its-legacy/>.

31 "Thread By @Drellac: "THREAD (PART 4 Of 4): Why You Shouldn't Trust @Quilliamorg'S Report On & The Claim That 84% Of "Grooming Gang Offenders" [...] #Groominggangs". 2018. *Threadreaderapp.Com*. <https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1059824185550299136.html>.

32 Cockbain, Ella, and Waqas Tufail. 2020. "Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate: Challenging The Harms Of The 'Muslim Grooming Gangs' Narrative". *Race & Class* 61 (3): 3-32. doi:10.1177/0306396819895727.

33 Home Office. 2020. "Characteristics Of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation In The Community," https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/943955/Characteristics_of_group-based_child_sexual_exploitation_in_



Perpetuation of Islamophobic Tropes

The use of the terms “Asian grooming gangs” or “Muslim grooming gangs” perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the stigmatisation of Asian Muslim men, fostering an environment of prejudice and Islamophobia. If the term “Asian grooming gangs” is used, this does not explicitly implicate Islam, but its association with a specific community, who are mostly Muslim, contributes to a broader narrative that fosters hostility and hatred towards Muslims³⁴. This is not too dissimilar to how the term “P**i” can be offensive to Asians who are not of Pakistani origin. The negative stereotyping of Pakistani Muslim men as paedophiles not only distorts the public perception of an entire community but also perpetuates harmful biases. This can lead to increased levels of prejudice toward, and violence against, Muslims. The racialised element of Islamophobia is particularly evident, as individuals of South Asian descent are often targeted based on their perceived religious identity, even if they may not be Muslim³⁵.

The broader context of Islamophobia is crucial to understanding the implications of using such terms. Muslims in the UK already face elevated levels of hostility and violence, as highlighted by various studies and hate crime statistics. MEND's ComRes study in 2018 underscored the prevalence of prejudice against Muslims, indicating that they are more likely to experience discrimination than any other religious group.³⁶ Moreover, Home Office hate crime statistics consistently reveal that Muslims constitute the largest religious group of those targeted in religious hate crimes³⁷. Linking Muslims or Asians to grooming attacks not only reinforces harmful stereotypes but also has serious long-term consequences. By perpetuating the idea that individuals from these communities are more prone to such criminal activities, there is a risk of escalating hate crimes and far-right attacks on British Muslims and minority communities. This dynamic further marginalises an already vulnerable group and perpetuates a cycle of discrimination that is detrimental to social cohesion and community relations.

[the_community_Literature_review.pdf](#).

34 Martin Parsons. 2017. "It's A Slur To Label These Grooming Gangs 'Asian' – They're Pakistani And Muslim | Conservative Home." *Conservative Home*. <https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2017/08/when-it-comes-to-these-grooming-gangs-its-time-to-call-a-spade-a-spade.html>

35 "Evidence on Hate Crime and its Violent Consequences - Written Evidence submitted by Dr Jagbir Ihutti-Johal." May 2018, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/90348/pdf/>.

36 "MEND Islamophobia Poll October 2018 Savanta Comres." 2018. *Comresglobal.Com*. <https://comresglobal.com/polls/mend-islamophobia-poll-october-2018/>.

37 "Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2022 to 2023 Second Edition," GOV.UK, November 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/>

A Biased and Racialised Concept

The observation by academics Ella Cockbain and Waqas Tufail regarding the biased nature of the term "grooming gangs" underscores the importance of critically examining the language used in discussions around criminal activities³⁸. The absence of a precise legal or social scientific definition for the term makes it susceptible to manipulation, allowing it to be shaped to fit Islamophobic or racialised narratives. This malleability not only compromises the accuracy of the discourse but also raises questions about the motives behind the use of such terminology. The complexity surrounding the term "grooming" further complicates the discourse. As Cockbain and Tufail highlight, "grooming" does not represent a singular criminal offence but rather encompasses a range of offences falling under the umbrella of CSE, including rape and sexual activity with a child³⁹. This lack of specificity in the term contributes to the challenge of accurately assessing the scope of the issue.

Drawing parallels with historical racialised concepts in the criminal justice system, such as "muggers" and "super-predators" - tropes used against young inner-city black men⁴⁰ - this shows how the Asian/Muslim grooming gang narrative, like its predecessors, is not grounded in an accurate representation of the realities. Instead, it tends to lead to the criminalisation of entire communities, fostering an environment of fear and suspicion towards them. In essence, the critical analysis provided by Cockbain and Tufail urges a reconsideration of the language and narratives surrounding criminal activities. It emphasises the need for a more nuanced and evidence-based approach to discussing issues like grooming gangs to avoid the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. We should endeavour to be unbiased in the language we

[hate-crime-england-and-wales-2022-to-2023/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2022-to-2023](https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396819895727).

38 Cockbain, Ella, and Waqas Tufail. 2020. "Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate: Challenging The Harms Of The 'Muslim Grooming Gangs' Narrative". *Race & Class* 61 (3): 3-32. doi:10.1177/0306396819895727.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Cockbain, Ella, and Waqas Tufail. 2020. "Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate: Challenging The Harms Of The 'Muslim Grooming Gangs' Narrative". *Race & Class* 61 (3): 3-32. doi:10.1177/0306396819895727.

42 Ibid.



use to describe these offences. Currently, in political and media discourse the term 'grooming gangs' appears largely reserved for people of a South Asian/Muslim background, reflective of an engrained racist idea of "uniquely dangerous masculinities of Muslim men"⁴¹. Instead, we should endeavour to use more neutral language to describe these crimes, regardless of the ethnic/religious background of those who commit them. Simply utilising the more neutral term CSE more widely sheds the racist baggage packed into the term grooming gangs⁴², and because it is the term used more widely by police and policymakers, it brings a level of maturity to the conversation rather than tabloid hysteria.

The Role of Media & Politicians in Amplifying the Message

Equally troubling is the role played by media outlets in disseminating and amplifying such narratives without critical assessment. The unquestioning acceptance and dissemination of The Quilliam Foundation's debunked research by prominent news sources like Sky News⁴³, The Independent⁴⁴, The Times⁴⁵, and the far-right Breitbart⁴⁶ contributed to the perpetuation of distorted information. The lack of rigorous fact-checking and critical analysis by these media outlets is indicative of a systemic issue within journalism when it comes to reporting on sensitive topics related to race and religion. The chain reaction that follows the circulation of such distorted narratives is particularly concerning. The Quilliam report was picked up and utilised by politicians, including members of UKIP and the House of Lords, to justify harmful tropes against the Muslim community⁴⁷. The example of a politician invoking the report to make sweeping claims about "millions of rapes of white and Sikh girls by Muslim men" and "250,000 victims of radical Muslim grooming gangs"⁴⁸ exemplifies the dangerous consequences of misrepresenting data. Indeed, studies have shown that the media's discursive framing of the CSE gangs issue differs depending on whether it is Asian/Muslim or white offenders being discussed⁴⁹. Often, the crimes of white perpetrators are framed with sympathetic narratives, with common themes of socio-economic deprivation, childhood abuse, drug abuse and mental illness. On the other hand, the variable used

to explain Asian/Muslim offenders tends to be their cultural or religious background, which seems to somehow predispose them to predatory behaviour, particularly towards those who do not fit within their ethno-religious 'in-group.'

Perhaps no incident better captures the skewed and biased nature of reporting on CSE than an incident involving the sitting Labour MP for Rotherham, Sarah Champion. In July 2018 The Times published a front-page story with the headline Terror Police Boost MP's Security Over Criticism of Asian Sex Gangs⁵⁰. The MP in question was Ms. Champion, who had written a highly controversial article in The Sun in the summer of 2017 titled, British Pakistani Men ARE Raping and Exploiting White Girls ... And It's Time we Faced Up To It⁵¹. Ms. Champion's article was full of racist and Islamophobic suggestions, including a sentence which read, "[t]hese people [Pakistanis] are predators and the common denominator is their ethnic heritage"⁵². Considering that The Sun is reported to be the most widely read news source in the UK, reaching around 31.1 million readers per month⁵³, there is no doubt that public perception of Asian/Muslim involvement in grooming gangs, already conditioned by years of similar media output, would have been impacted by Champion's article. In its July 2018 story, written by Andrew Norfolk, a journalist with an apparent history of fabricating anti-Muslim stories⁵⁴, The Times reported that a Rotherham-based Muslim charity, Just Yorkshire, had issued a public condemnation of Champion's article which led to death threats against her. However, a subsequent investigation⁵⁵ found

43 Lockwood, Sally. 2017. "Grooming Gang Convictions '84% Asian', Say Researchers." Sky News: <https://news.sky.com/story/grooming-gang-convictions-84-asian-say-researchers-11164589>.

44 Barnes, Tom. 2017. "British-Pakistani Researchers Say Grooming Gangs Are 84% Asian." The Independent: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/quilliam-grooming-gangs-report-asian-abuse-rotherham-rochdale-newcastle-a8101941.html>.

45 Burden, Elizabeth. 2017. "Grooming Gang Study Reveals 84% Are Asian." The Times: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/child-groomer-study-by-quilliam-think-tank-finds-84-are-asian-0r3csrbmb>.

46 Hale, Virginia. 2017. "Grooming Gangs: 84 Per Cent Convicted 'Asian', White Girls Seen As 'Fair Game'". Breitbart: <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2017/12/10/84-grooming-gangs-asian-report/>.

47 Cockbain, Ella, and Waqas Tufail. 2020. "Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate: Challenging The Harms Of The 'Muslim Grooming Gangs' Narrative". *Race & Class* 61 (3): 3-32.

Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Shamim Miah. January 2015. "The Groomers and the Question of Race." *Identity Papers: A Journal of British and Irish Studies*. 1 (1), pp.54-65.

See also, Joseph Harker, "This is How Racism Takes Root." July 22, 2012. The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2012/jul/22/how-racism-takes-root>

50 Andrew Norfolk. July 2018. "Terror Policy Boost Security for MP Sarah Champion Over Criticism of Asian Sex Gangs." The Times: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/terror-police-boost-security-for-mp-sarah-champion-over-criticism-of-asian-sex-gangs-jz3ftp8b9>

51 Sarah Champion. August 10 2017. "British Pakistani Men ARE Raping and Exploiting White Girls ... And It's Time we Faced Up To It." The Sun: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4218648/british-pakistani-men-rape-exploiting-white-girls/>

52 Ibid.

53 Dominic Ponsford. March 24 2023. "Audience Data: Sun Claims Top Spot as UK's Most Widely Read Commercial Newsbrand." Press Gazette: https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media_metrics/most-popular-newspaper-uk-the-sun/

54 Brian Cathcart and Paddy French. June 24 2019. "Unmasked: Andrew Norfolk, The Times and Anti-Muslim Reporting. - A Case to Answer." Media Reform Coalition: <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/unmasked-andrew-norfolk-the-times-and-anti-muslim-reporting-a-case-to-answer>

55 Ibid

that this attribution was false. In fact, it was found that Just Yorkshire's work, focused on human rights, had nothing to do with any threats made against Champion, a fact acknowledged by The Times as a "slip" on their part ⁵⁶. Champion herself also issued an apology for her "extremely poor choice of words" in her 2017 piece in The Sun. Nevertheless the reporting had devastating consequences for Just Yorkshire, which received hate mail following the initial story and subsequently had to close as a result of a loss of funding. ⁵⁹

What this unfortunate episode demonstrates is the impunity that some politicians and journalists seem to think they have when it comes to making sweeping accusations about a particular ethno-religious group, particularly when it comes to the issue of CSE. Worse still, there appears to be almost no care given to what the data shows, as discussed earlier in this report: that most CSE groups are not made up of Asian/Muslim people, but white offenders. Through such reckless regard for truth, both groups fail at what they should be trying to achieve. Politicians should be focused on using rhetoric which fosters inter-group solidarity, not division, in order to establish the kind of social cohesion necessary to tackling CSE. Journalists should be focused on reporting the truth about CSE so to properly inform the public debate, not propagating racially-charged stereotypes based on sloppy research that leaves readers with a skewed understanding of the facts.

More recently the racist grooming gangs rhetoric has again blown up, with far right figures and right wing politicians framing the issue in racialised terms. In January 2025, Elon Musk reignited the debate on grooming gangs in England with controversial tweets accusing Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and other senior politicians of covering up the scandal⁵⁷. Musk's comments thrust the issue back into the political spotlight, prompting calls for a new national inquiry and reigniting racialised narratives about Pakistani or Muslim men being the main perpetrators. This renewed debate not only fuelled political tensions but also served to amplify divisive rhetoric, with critics arguing that many of the political figures involved were more focused on scoring points than on addressing the issue's complexities.

56 Ibid, p.27.

57 'Tories demand inquiry into grooming gangs scandal as Elon Musk attacks Starmer', The Independent, 3 Jan 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/kemi-badenoch-musk-starmer-grooming-gangs-b2672889.html>

58 'Tory and Reform MPs accused of 'weaponising trauma' of grooming victims, as Farage calls for inquiry to focus on Pakistani men', The Guardian, 8 Jan 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2025/jan/08/conservatives-elon-musk-keir-starmer-kemi-badenoch-child-safety-pmqs-uk-politics-latest-updates?filterKeyEvents=false&page=with%3Ablock-677e9ef38f083025c2f3bfe0#block-677e9ef38f083025c2f3bfe0>

59 'Lib Dems call for Kemi Badenoch to sack Robert Jenrick over 'divisive comments'', The Guardian, 7 Jan 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jan/07/robert-jenrick-immigration-remarks-kemi-badenoch-lib-dems>

60 Robert Jenrick, X, 4 Jan 2025, available at: <https://x.com/RobertJenrick/status/1875549435926581584>



Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch and Reform UK leader Nigel Farage quickly jumped on the bandwagon, calling for a fresh inquiry into grooming gangs, often framing the issue in racial terms⁵⁸. Their statements, critics contend, are less about supporting victims and more about stoking division and galvanizing their political bases. Shadow Justice Secretary Robert Jenrick has been especially vocal, claiming that Pakistani men are "overrepresented" in grooming gangs and accusing them of targeting white working-class girls because they see them as "worthless"⁵⁹. Jenrick has also blamed "mass migration" from "alien cultures" with "medieval attitudes towards women" for the problem.⁶⁰ However, these comments raise concerns about Jenrick's motives. While he has

made inflammatory statements, he failed to act on the findings of a previous inquiry into child sexual exploitation during his time in government, casting doubt on his genuine concern for the victims.

Jenrick, Farage, and Badenoch have weaponised CSE for political gain. This diverts attention from the deeper social and institutional factors that need to be addressed. By focusing on race and religion, they risk overshadowing the real need for systemic reform.

Politicians who use CSE to incite racial hatred and Islamophobia do nothing to protect children. Instead, they fuel division and reinforce harmful stereotypes that advance far-right agendas. The focus must remain on supporting victims, preventing further abuse, and developing lasting solutions to safeguard all children from harm. This is a societal issue that demands a response centered on justice and the well-being of those affected.



Harmful to the Victims

One of the significant consequences of the Islamophobic and racialised narrative surrounding Asian/Muslim grooming gangs is the potential harm it inflicts upon the real victims of CSE ⁶¹. The narrative, as highlighted in a study of 9,000 CSE service cases, tends to perpetuate a skewed representation by consistently alluding to the white identity of victims ⁶², as seen in the Quilliam report. This misrepresentation not only distorts the reality

of CSE but also has tangible repercussions on the provision of support services. The study revealing that a third of the victims were male and around a fifth were from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds underscores the need for a more inclusive approach in addressing the diverse needs of victims ⁶³. Of 9,042 victims, 6% were Black, 5% Asian and 5% Mixed race.” The skewed narrative has resulted in the shaping of support services that are disproportionately geared towards white girls, potentially leaving out other vulnerable demographics ⁶⁴. Ethnic minorities, boys, LGBTQ+ children, and those with disabilities may find themselves overlooked or underserved

due to the narrative's myopic focus ⁶⁵. This not only reflects a failure to recognise the intersectionality of victimhood but also perpetuates systemic biases within support systems, hindering their ability to provide comprehensive and inclusive assistance.

The below personal account of a CSE victim, expressing the abuse received for not fitting a particular agenda or supporting specific figures like Tommy Robinson, offers a poignant illustration of how the narrative can directly impact individuals seeking support.

...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) ⁶⁶.

The victim's experience of being initially accepted until the realisation that their abuse wasn't solely perpetrated by Muslims demonstrates the dangerous polarisation and politicisation of victims' stories. This kind of manipulation perpetuates a divisive environment, where victims may feel coerced into conforming to a specific narrative to receive empathy and support, further undermining the goal of assisting those who have suffered from CSE.

61 Cockbain, Ella, and Waqas Tufail. 2020. "Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate: Challenging The Harms Of The 'Muslim Grooming Gangs' Narrative". *Race & Class* 61 (3): 3-32. doi:10.1177/0306396819895727.

62 FN. 57: Cockbain E., Ashby M., Brayley, H., 2015, 'Immaterial boys? A large-scale exploration of gender-based differences in child sexual exploitation service users', *Sexual Abuse: a journal of research and treatment* 29 (7): 658-84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063215616817>

63 Ibid.

64 Cockbain and Tufail, 'Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate'

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

In essence, the Islamophobic and racialised narrative not only contributes to the perpetuation of harmful tropes but also has tangible, detrimental effects on the ability of CSE victims to access adequate support. The skewed representation of victims, coupled with a narrow focus on certain demographics, leads to an exclusionary approach in support services, hindering the development of a more nuanced and inclusive response to the complex needs of survivors. Addressing this issue requires not only debunking the stereotypes but also a fundamental reevaluation of support systems to ensure they are equipped to assist victims from all backgrounds, genders, and abilities.

The recent calls for additional inquiries into grooming gangs are concerning, as there have already been thorough investigations, such as the Jay Report, which identified critical systemic failures and provided actionable recommendations⁶⁷. Professor Alexis Jay's findings, supported by experts, focus on practical measures to prevent future exploitation and improve support for victims, rather than the ethnicity or religion of perpetrators. She also warned that another inquiry into CSE would delay government action and criticised the politicisation of the issue, which overlooks victims and their needs.⁶⁸ Instead of reopening inquiries, the priority should be on implementing these existing recommendations to drive real change. Further inquiries would only delay necessary reforms and prolong the suffering of victims who are already waiting for justice and support.



⁶⁷ The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, October 2022, <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/inquiry/final-report.html>

⁶⁸ 'Former chair of child abuse inquiry says another one would only delay action', The Guardian, 7 Jan 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jan/07/child-abuse-inquiry-uk-alexis-jay-former-chair>

Conclusion and Recommendations

Let there be no doubt: MEND unequivocally supports the aim of tackling the heinous crimes of CSE, and calls for better support services for the victims. However, we urge policymakers to act with due sensitivity, without framing CSE as an issue largely confined to a particular ethno-religious demographic, thereby maligning a whole minority community. Indeed, the association between Asians/Muslims and CSE is false and it has long-term impacts on some of the most vulnerable in society. Such stereotyping does nothing to safeguard those in need; in fact, all it does is make victims more vulnerable, society more fractious and threatens the security of ethnic minorities in Britain.

In light of what has been discussed in this report, MEND urges the following recommendations to be considered concerning the association of Asians and Muslims with CSE.

Media Responsibility and Sensationalism:

The perpetuation of the Asian/Muslim grooming gang's narrative is not only the outcome of flawed research, but also media sensationalism. Media outlets - especially tabloid media - driven by the need for attention-grabbing headlines, have often shown a willingness to perpetuate the Asian/Muslim grooming gangs trope. This not only serves to skew the public's understanding of this complex social issue, but it is also grist to the mill of right-wing activists, many of whom have seized upon the narrative to justify their anti-Asian and Islamophobic activities. The media should therefore play a constructive role in dismantling unfounded narratives rather than perpetuating them for sensational gains.

Political Responsibility and Populism:

The politicisation of the Asian/Muslim grooming gangs narrative underscores a broader trend of political instrumentalisation and populism. Such rhetoric not only deflects attention from evidence-based policy-making but also contributes to the polarisation of society. Political leaders have a responsibility to promote informed discourse, avoiding the use of inflammatory language that reinforces harmful stereotypes and further divides communities.

Intersectionality and Inclusive Support Services:

An often overlooked aspect of the discourse surrounding CSE is the intersectionality of the victims. While prevailing narratives tend to focus largely on the white victims of these crimes, the reality is far more complex, and others, such as those belonging to BAME backgrounds, tend to be overlooked. A truly comprehensive approach to tackling this issue must consider the challenges faced by victims from a host of backgrounds, including people from BAME backgrounds, disabled people, male victims and LGBTQ+ children. Support services need to be tailored to address the specific needs of all victims, ensuring inclusivity and sensitivity to the diverse experiences of those affected.

Educational Initiatives to Counter Stereotypes:

Addressing the harmful Asian/Muslim grooming gangs narrative requires proactive educational initiatives that challenge stereotypes and promote critical thinking. For example, incorporating comprehensive sex education that goes beyond stereotypes to consider the underlying social causes of CSE could be impactful. By fostering an environment of empathy and understanding, educational initiatives can contribute to dismantling harmful narratives and promoting a more inclusive and informed society. In the end, evidence-based public education is absolutely necessary if we are to tackle the affliction of CSE.

Community Engagement and Counter-Narratives:

Efforts to counter the "Asian or Muslim grooming gangs" narrative must involve active engagement with affected communities. Building trust between law enforcement, policymakers, and community leaders is essential to address the root causes of CSE. Furthermore, fostering counter-narratives within these communities can challenge prevailing stereotypes and promote a more accurate understanding of the issue. Community-based initiatives, supported by evidence-based research, can play a crucial role in dispelling myths and fostering collaboration to protect vulnerable individuals from exploitation.

Scrapping the Usage of the Phrase:

Finally, because the academic research has shown that there is no legitimate basis for describing grooming gangs as an "Asian" or "Muslim", the very use of those words to describe the phenomenon should be scrapped. Continued insistence on the use of such divisive terminology, besides not being grounded in any serious fact-based research, only serves to perpetuate prejudice toward Asian and Muslim people. Instead policy-makers and media editors should opt for the less racially-charged and more neutral term, Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE).

Support and Justice for Victims:

To address public misunderstanding and deliver justice for the innocent victims of this heinous crime, it is essential that the government fully implements all 20 recommendations outlined in the Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (The Jay Inquiry). This comprehensive approach will not only help clarify key issues but also ensure meaningful action is taken to protect victims and prevent future abuse.



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