The racialised and Islamophobic framing of the Rotherham and Rochdale child sexual abuse scandals

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Introduction

For over a decade, British Muslims have been at the forefront of political, media and societal concerns in regards to terrorism, radicalisation, women’s rights, segregation and, most recently, the sexual exploitation and abuse of young women. Demonised, marginalised and criminalised due to inflammatory political rhetoric, inaccurate, irresponsible and sensationalist media reporting, discriminatory counter terrorism policies and legislation and state surveillance, British Muslims have emerged as a perceived racialised threat. This has continued apace with the onset of the Rochdale and Rotherham ‘grooming’ child sexual abuse scandals which in popular discourse have been dominated by representations focusing on race, ethnicity and the dangerous masculinities of Muslim men (Cockbain 2013; Gill and Harrison 2015). This disproportionate and racist narrative has served to both frame and limit the debate relating to the sexual exploitation and violence experienced by young female victims at a pivotal moment when the issue had been brought to national attention. This chapter compares and contrasts the representations and discourse of racialised and non-racialised reporting of child sexual abuse and situates the ‘grooming’ scandals in the context of anti-Muslim racism.

The history of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism within the UK (and further afield) was established long before 2001 (Poynting and Mason 2007), yet in recent years these forms of racism have, arguably, significantly intensified. This period has been punctuated by the specific targeting of young British Muslims through state surveillance, such as in the form of divisive and discriminatory government-funded ‘counter terrorism’ initiatives (Kundnani 2014); by far right nationalist groups marching through and attacking areas with large Muslim populations (Johnston and Kavanagh 2013); and by violently racist anti-Muslim attacks resulting in the killing of British citizens (Greatrex 2013). These examples are not unique and are compounded by recent episodes of racialised panic generated by lurid (and unfounded) headlines of ‘Islamic takeovers’ within schools and by reports of British Muslims attempting to reach conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. Contemporary Islamophobia is recognised for its notable presence in the online world (Awan and Zempi 2016) and as a globalised phenomenon observable in a multitude of Western contexts (Morgan and Poynting 2012).
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Recent high profile news stories relating to sexual abuse occurring within the towns of Rotherham in South Yorkshire and Rochdale in Greater Manchester have led to a number of significant consequences, including the publication of independent reports highlighting individual and institutional failures. The most high profile of these, a report by Professor Alexis Jay (2014) examining the child abuse that took place in Rotherham, caused a sensation in the media and resulted in widespread condemnation of the local council, police and social services. A prominent feature in the media and political discourse that followed, however, was that these events could be examined through a lens of race and ethnicity. In particular, attention swiftly turned to the events and their causes being attributed, variously, to ‘Muslim’, ‘Asian’ and ‘Pakistani’ communities. This chapter is concerned with addressing the reporting and fallout from the events in Rotherham and from the earlier events in Rochdale. Specifically, it argues that the representation of the events that took place in Rotherham and Rochdale and the subsequent impact this had, vary markedly from other instances where the sexual abuse of women and young girls has been reported. It is argued that the representations of the ‘grooming’ sexual abuse scandals can be understood through the ‘mainstreaming of Islamophobia’ (Hussein and Poynting 2017, p. 337) within contemporary Western societies, of which a key component is ‘alleged hyperpatriarchy and entrenched misogyny’ and ‘the supposed tolerance of child abuse’. Moreover, and with reference to empirical data, it is argued that negative portrayals of Muslims collectively seeking to hold whole communities to account for the crimes of a few, further alienate and criminalise this community, one already facing discriminatory counter-terrorism policies and legislation, state surveillance, disproportionate policing and consistent demands to integrate (Tufail and Poynting 2013). The racialised and Islamophobic framing of the Rochdale and Rotherham child sexual abuse scandals, emboldened by the narratives of prominent media, state institutions and political elites, has also prevented the core issue of violence against women being placed at the centre of public debate.

Background: Rotherham, Rochdale and the emergence of the ‘grooming’ child abuse scandals

In November 2010, five men were jailed for a series of sex offences committed against children in Rotherham, South Yorkshire (BBC News 2010). The events, labelled at the time as the ‘Asian grooming case’ by the Yorkshire Post (2010), returned to the spotlight in 2012 after an investigation by The Times (Norfolk 2012), based on confidential police reports and intelligence, revealed that offenders identified to the police were not prosecuted and that child abuse had taken place on a ‘vast scale’. The Times alleged that, in the confidential police and council documents they had accessed, there was reluctance to investigate and prosecute Asian offenders due to fear over exacerbating community tensions. Quite predictably, the aftermath of The Times investigation proved to be oxygen for the far right, from fascist groups such as the British National Party (BNP), which subsequently imploded in the 2015 UK general elections, to the similarly inclined but seemingly more mainstream United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). However, the events also ignited debate across the media and political spectrum with commentators Right and Left jostling for position in order to offer a perspective on precisely what had transpired to generate – by all accounts – the widespread sexual abuse of female children.

A key moment that heightened interest, outrage, debate and speculation in the Rotherham child sex abuse cases was the publication of a report by Professor Alexis Jay, titled Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (2014), hereafter referred to as the Jay Report. Published in August 2014, the major headline to emerge from the report was the author’s
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‘conservative’ estimate that at least 1,400 children had been sexually abused and exploited between 1997 and 2013. This revelation of widespread child sexual exploitation dominated the news headlines for several days and resulted in the Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council leader Roger Stone stepping down with immediate effect, followed by a string of other high profile resignations (most notably of Shaun Wright, the South Yorkshire Police Crime Commissioner who, in somewhat farcical and ultimately futile circumstances, had initially refused to stand down). The fallout from these revelations was dramatic and is in many senses an on-going process; debate has raged on the roles of race, ethnicity, class and gender in facilitating the abuse of women and of catastrophic and possibly corrupt individual and institutional failure from agencies including the police, council and social services.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) opened a special investigation named Operation Stovewood examining historical sexual abuse crimes committed in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013. As of 2018, 110 potential suspects have been identified, of which 38 have been arrested, 18 charged and 4 convicted with lengthy prison sentences (Halliday 2018). This followed the launch of Operation Yewtree, a Metropolitan Police investigation into allegations of sexual abuse committed by celebrities including Jimmy Savile, Rolf Harris and Max Clifford. More recently, football coach Barry Bennell was sentenced to over 30 years in prison for more than 50 historical sexual abuse offences against young boys and the associated investigation into abuse in football, Operation Hydrant, has identified over 290 suspects and 839 possible victims (The Guardian 2018). This chapter examines the ways in which the Rotherham child sex case abuse cases and their aftermath were reported, while also referencing the Rochdale child sex abuse cases (see Tufail and Poynting 2016 for a more detailed analysis and discussion of the events that took place in Rochdale). The racialised and Islamophobic framing of the Rotherham and Rochdale child sexual abuse scandals has resulted in a number of deleterious consequences including worsened community relations, violent anti-Muslim racism and the decentring of violence against women in public debate.

Media framing and ‘the ethnic dimension’

The immediate fallout from the Jay Report involved a flurry of newspaper headlines and reports condemning the abuses. The Daily Express (2014), for example, presented its outrage by railing against the ‘Muslim gangs’ operating in Rotherham while declaring that ‘the feelings of ethnic minorities or those on the Left who presume to speak for them has no part to play’. In similar fashion, The Telegraph ran an article by columnist Allison Pearson (2014) suggesting that the root cause of the abuses ran at the heart of either (or both) the Muslim and Pakistani community. Pearson, noted for her bigoted, outspoken views, took issue with the cultural allowances ‘the West’ had made to these seemingly backward communities. As Pearson explained, ‘Leaders of the Pakistani Muslim community – essentially a Victorian society that has landed like Doctor Who’s Tardis on a liberal, permissive planet it despises – are at pains to deny that the grooming gang’s behaviour has anything to do with ethnic origin or contemptible attitudes towards women’ (Pearson 2014). Essentially a tirade against Leftists, multiculturalism and political correctness, the article was certainly not alone in adopting this particular focus. Indeed, the Rotherham child abuse scandal was international news, evidenced by an article in the Washington Post titled ‘Political Correctness about Muslims may have led UK officials to ignore reports of sex abuse’ (Grundy 2014). The Daily Mail, however, also extended its outrage to rival news outlets with an article by de Graaf (2014) attacking the BBC for not highlighting enough that the abusers in Rotherham were Asian men. The claims were centred on her analysis that ‘Four of seven articles on BBC News online do not mention
Pakistani men’ (De Graaf 2014). De Graaf suggested that race and ethnicity were mentioned in the Jay Report and were thus relevant factors in the sexual abuses that took place.

Both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers focussed on the aspects of the Jay Report that related to race and ethnicity. A section of the report was dedicated to ‘Issues of Ethnicity’ and it concluded that staff across agencies including the council and police were reluctant to frame matters related to child sexual exploitation (CSE) as having an ‘ethnic dimension’. On race and ethnicity, the analysis within the Jay Report is evidently weak, with little attempt at nuance and lacking any sense of detail. For instance, it included problematic statements such as ‘there was a widespread perception that messages conveyed by some senior people in the Council and also the Police, were to “downplay” the ethnic dimensions of CSE’ (Jay 2014, p. 91). What these ‘ethnic dimensions’ might be are never discussed or explained by Jay. Rather, the reader is compelled to read between the lines and assume that, as the ethnicities of the perpetrators and victims are different, an ‘ethnic dimension’ had to be at play. The clumsy analysis and phrasing of matters related to race and ethnicity is repeated in the recommendations section of the Jay Report. It contends in Recommendation 14 that: ‘The issue of race should be tackled as an absolute priority if it is a significant factor in the criminal activity of organised child sexual abuse in the Borough’ (Jay 2014, p. 93). Again, no attempt is made to examine or explain what exactly it is about race that may be such a ‘significant factor’ in the context of child abuse. This lack of specificity by Jay, I argue, was a contributory factor to the lurid and hysterical headlines which painted a picture of a council and police force failing to prevent child abuse for fear of being labelled racist. This, too, is a rather peculiar contention.

‘Asian males’, the ethnic category under scrutiny in the context of the Rochdale and Rotherham child abuse scandals, is – within the criminal justice system – a broad-brush category usually referring to individuals of South Asian origin. An Asian person is twice as likely to be stopped and searched by the police than a white person (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2010) and eleven times more likely to be detained at British ports, including airports, than a white person (Hurrell 2013). As Kalra (2006, p. 234) has noted: ‘Systematic racialisation of BrAsian [British Asian] young people has been a routine aspect of policing these communities since their arrival in Britain’. This process of racialisation has affected, negatively, the policing ‘service’ Asian people within the UK have experienced, as perpetrators and alleged perpetrators, and as victims. For reasons such as these many minority communities, including Asian communities, have historically been considered to have been over-policed and under-protected in the UK. In this context then, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the claim in the Jay Report of agencies including the police being reluctant to act for fear of being labelled ‘racist’ as nothing short of incredulous. To cite some recent examples, fears of being labelled ‘racist’ have certainly not prevented police forces continually failing to meet recruitment standards for Black and Asian staff as set out by the Macpherson Inquiry (Rollock 2009) or failed to halt significant racial disparities in stop and search (Home Office 2017). It also did not prevent Greater Manchester Police from ordering a re-write of an independent report they had commissioned which alleged institutional racism within the force (Scheerhout 2013).

The Jay Report made 14 recommendations that did not focus on the importance of race and ethnicity. These recommendations, primarily focussing on improving the practices and policies of agencies including social services, the council and the police, did not make the headlines of the press in the same way as did the issues of race, ethnicity and ‘political correctness’ (see Tufail 2018 for a detailed analysis of the role of the ‘political correctness’ narrative). Indeed, the Jay Report is damning of police actions – or inactions – in failing to intervene and to prevent the sexual abuse and exploitation of young girls. Documented victim testimony shows that police
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officers treated them ‘with contempt’ (Jay 2014, p. 1); some examples included girls as young as 13 years of age being blamed for placing themselves in situations where they would be sexually exploited and being described by police officers as ‘undesirables’ not worthy of police protection. Potential ramifications of such misogynistic and dismissive police attitudes to young female victims of rape and sexual assault are laid out by Kelly et al. (2005) in their study of attrition in reported rape cases. They found that police officers and prosecutors overestimated the scale of false allegations, leading to a ‘culture of scepticism’ and that discouragement by the police during investigations was a strong reason for victims ceasing to cooperate.

The intense criticism within the Jay Report was not the first time that police failings were identified in the context the sexual exploitation of women and young girls. A police whistleblower in Rochdale revealed, at the height of the media coverage of the events at the time, that police officers in Greater Manchester Police did not take victim allegations of abuse seriously (Deith 2013). Margaret Oliver, a detective constable, resigned in protest after witnessing evidence presented by teenage victims of sexual abuse being ignored by police officers. This theme, of police officers and forces not taking victims of child abuse seriously, continued with criticism of South Yorkshire Police following the Rotherham child abuse cases. A report by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate Constabulary, finding that a vulnerable child had been arrested at the home of a sex offender for possessing condoms, surmised that South Yorkshire Police had only a ‘limited understanding’ of the threat posed by sex offenders to vulnerable children (Pidd 2014). An ITN News investigation claimed that several former and serving police officers within Greater Manchester Police had informed them that child abuse was not investigated properly, with one officer alleging a ‘cover up’ of the issue within the force (Geissler 2014).

In contrast to the extensive newspaper coverage dedicated to sex crimes committed by individuals from certain minority backgrounds, sexual abuse committed by police officers has rarely made the headlines. A little publicised report commissioned by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (Owers et al. 2012) that received very little coverage in the mainstream press revealed over 50 cases of sexual assault by police in the preceding two-year period. The same report also acknowledged that, as police officers were the perpetrators, under-reporting was a significant problem. However, the report authors understood sexual abuse committed by police officers as a form of corruption. The report did not highlight a culture of misogyny or of institutional failings in preventing the abuse. This is in stark contrast to the discourse and representation surrounding the sexual abuse scandals that took place in Rochdale and Rotherham, dominated by claims that inferior cultures and dangerous, Muslim masculinities were at play. Whether representations of sexual abuse committed by groups of white men vary markedly to the representations of the abuse that took place in Rotherham and Rochdale also requires consideration.

Beyond race and ethnicity: representations of white sex offenders

During the period in which the ‘grooming’ child abuse scandals associated to ‘Asian’ or ‘Muslim’ men erupted, a number of similar cases took place where there was considerably less interest in the race, ethnicity or religion of the perpetrators. For instance, in 2010 the Daily Mail reported a story about a group of child abusers apprehended in West Cornwall. The headline ran: ‘Paedophile ring “groomed young girls before repeatedly abusing them in an empty holiday cottage”’ (Daily Mail 2010). The pictures accompanying the headline were of five white men. In the article, no reference was made to the perpetrators’ race or ethnicity, religion or faith; nor is reference made to the race or ethnicity of the victims. In many if not all other aspects, the facts reported in this case were similar to those reported in the Rotherham and Rochdale cases.
In this West Cornwall case, as in the more heavily reported incidents, the young victims of sexual abuse (some as young as five years of age) were groomed and then abused repeatedly over a prolonged period of time. The similarities are evident, yet the differences in how the cases were reported are stark. This was further evidenced by the report of a 13 year old child from North Yorkshire who was sexually abused by thirty men (Daily Mail 2013). The pictures accompanying the story were of white men and yet no mention was made of the race, ethnicity or religion of either the perpetrators or the victim. Furthermore, these two news stories were barely reported in the press, in comparison to the events in Rotherham and Rochdale. There was no public outcry, no inquiries were commissioned, politicians did not comment on them, and the towns involved were not visited by far right groups and fascists wishing to exploit them for political gain (ITV News 2014).

In 2012, a year after his death, the former entertainer and BBC employee Jimmy Savile was linked to scores of sex crimes against predominantly young girls and women (BBC News 2012). It is believed Savile may have committed sexual crimes against more than one thousand victims on BBC premises, making him probably the most prolific sexual abuser in British history (Boffey 2014). Greater Manchester Police has admitted that Cyril Smith, former Liberal MP for Rochdale, and also now deceased, should have been charged while he was alive for sexual abuse committed against young boys (Dodd 2012). Operation Yewtree, initiated by the Metropolitan Police after the allegations relating to Savile came to light, has now highlighted the sex crimes of other celebrities, leading to the conviction of well-known public figures such as Max Clifford (Telegraph 2014). All of the men currently known to be under investigation as part of Operation Yewtree, including the individuals mentioned above, are white. Yet their race, ethnicity or religion (or that of their victims) does not feature at all in the reporting of the events. As with the sexual abuse of children carried out by groups of white men in West Cornwall and North Yorkshire, the representation of the events, including the perceived motivating factors behind them, contrast significantly to the representation of the events in Rotherham and Rochdale.

One of the common responses to explaining why the events in Rotherham and Rochdale were examined so vividly with regards to race, ethnicity and religion was that the ‘Asian’ or ‘Muslim’ gangs carried out not only sexual but also racist crimes by targeting white victims. This claim, however, does not hold up to scrutiny for the following reasons. First, the overwhelming theme of the Jay Report presents a picture of vulnerable children repeatedly failed by a number of individuals and agencies whose job it was to protect them. Second, the report also makes reference to Asian female victims of sexual abuse, noting that, due to under-reporting from within that community, the true extent of the number of Asian female victims of child sexual abuse is very likely to be higher than is currently known. The Jay Report cites a report by the Deputy Children’s Commissioner for England that dismisses the supposed ‘racist’ nature of sexual attacks by ‘Asian’ or ‘Muslim’ men on white children by stating:

one of these myths was that only white girls are victims of sexual exploitation by Asian or Muslim males, as if these men only abuse outside of their own community, driven by hatred and contempt for white females. This belief flies in the face of evidence that shows that those who violate children are most likely to target those who are closest to them and most easily accessible.

(Jay 2014, p. 94)

Simon Danczuk, the disgraced former Labour MP for Rochdale who was suspended after sending sexually explicit text messages to a teenager, was critical of the role of ‘ethnicity’ being ignored in the wake of the child sexual exploitation scandal in Rochdale. He re-appeared in
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The media as the revelations about large scale sexual abuse of children became public and, in an interview alongside a political blogger on Channel 4, aired his views about what he saw as some of the contributory factors that facilitated the abuse. The comments followed on from his analysis of the abuse in Rochdale and he implored that “Asian men have a propendancy [sic] to be involved in this type of abuse” (Snow 2014). Danczuk does not elaborate on this any further and neither is he challenged on this viewpoint by the interviewer. While Danczuk was known for his right-wing views on matters relating to race and ethnicity, Labour MP for Rotherham Sarah Champion was regarded as a progressive, very much on the left and linked to causes associated with minority groups. However, Champion attracted national attention in August 2017 when she penned an editorial for right-wing tabloid The Sun titled ‘British Pakistani men ARE raping and exploiting white girls . . . and it’s time we faced up to it’ (Champion 2017). In the article, Champion argues ‘These people are predators and the common denominator is their ethnic heritage’ and in an attempt to seemingly indicate her courage for speaking out, states that she could no longer ‘shy away from doing the right thing by fearing being called a racist’.

In the aftermath of this article’s publication, Champion attempted to suggest her comments were taken out of context, though The Sun produced evidence that she approved the article. Champion later stepped down from her role as Shadow Minister for Equalities after being criticised and condemned from a cross-section of commentators including some of her own parliamentary colleagues and a number of anti-racist groups including Rotherham-based human rights charity JUST Yorkshire. The public comments made by both Danczuk and Champion, politicians seemingly from differing political traditions, highlights the durability of racist and Islamophobic discourse which often overlaps between right-wing and liberal commentary (Kumar 2012, 2014). Women Against Rape (WAR), a multi-racial organisation founded in 1976, campaign for women and girls who experience sexual, domestic and racist violence. In their response to the Jay Report and on the point of ethnicity in particular, they note that:

Race and ethnicity were used as an excuse to justify the lack of action against the perpetrators. This presumes that the Pakistani community would stand with rapists rather than victims, which is a blatant piece of racism on the part of the police, the council, the MPs and social services. The Asian community was outraged at the perpetrators and the police and politicians protection of the perpetrators.

(Women Against Rape 2014)

Furthermore, WAR highlight agency and police failings of not investigating allegations of sexual abuse, of not believing victims and, indeed, of even criminalising victims. They also highlight 37 questions the Jay Report failed to address, including the roles of the different agencies involved and seeking clarification on other areas that were addressed. However, the most significant criticism is reserved for South Yorkshire Police and their links to historical and on-going corruption scandals.

Men’s sexual violence towards women and young girls has only relatively recently emerged in academic and policy debates, propelled by feminist campaigners. Of central importance in understanding men’s sexual violence is the role of patriarchy and the intersecting power structures related to race, class, age and status (Radford and Stanko 1991). The theme of male power manifested as sexual violence was evident in the abuse committed against vulnerable young girls in Rochdale and Rotherham, in the abuse committed by police officers, and in the abuse committed by celebrities as uncovered by Operation Yewtree, and is the prevalent theme of all sexual violence against women. Radford and Stanko (ibid.) noted that, beyond being regarded as a danger for women, sexual violence is not presented as a gendered issue, effectively serving
to depoliticise the debate which is predominantly concentrated on individual crime prevention. They further argue that the majority of sexual violence, concentrated within the home, is left ignored and yet, when the state does respond, it routinely fails the victims:

the bulk of violence to women, that which occurs in private, rarely comes to public attention, is scorned by the police, and the women who ask for police intervention are left neglected and often abused by the very system financed by the state to protect them.

(Radford and Stanko 1991, p. 189)

The recent revelations of widespread historic and contemporary sexual violence against women and young girls and the woeful official state responses to these crimes would appear to signify that little has changed in how victims experience the criminal justice system.

A further theme addressed by the Jay Report and which is a significant and prevalent feature of much sexual violence is the exploitation of vulnerable women and young girls. Jay (2014) noted that many of the young girls sexually exploited in Rotherham were in care at the time and that many perpetrators actively targeted these residents’ units and services. Significant safeguarding failures were highlighted, the circumstances of which echoed with Jimmy Savile’s systematic and widespread abuse carried out within care homes, hospitals and the studios of the BBC. However, it is necessary to go beyond terms such as ‘vulnerability’ which, while important, adopt a politically neutral position. Instead, it is essential to recognise that many of the young girls subjected to sexual violence from men as typified in the Rotherham, Rochdale and Operation Yewtree cases were from impoverished working class backgrounds. As Jones and Novak (1999) stress, systemic failings at the institutional level effectively assist in facilitating the abuse of poor, marginalised children by the powerful:

What those in power cannot tolerate is that abuse on the scale revealed in some children’s homes – and it is highly probable in all institutional settings which supposedly care for the vulnerable poor – flows from the systemic disregard which derives from a conception of sections of the population as being worthless. This worthlessness feeds into their powerlessness which in turn provides those in power with a sense of impunity in their behaviour.

(Jones and Novak 1999, p. 88)

In summarising the fallout of the Rotherham and Rochdale child sexual exploitation scandals, represented within a framework of race and ethnicity, the unpalatable truth may be that the contempt police officers often hold for minority groups was trumped in these instances by their contempt for these vulnerable young girls.

**Impact on the Muslim community**

Following the revelations of the child abuse cases within Rotherham and Rochdale and the intense media scrutiny that accompanied them, numerous examples of Muslim and Asian communities experiencing negative consequences became apparent. For instance, there was the revelation that, in Heywood, Rochdale, a taxi firm owned and operated by a white man was agreeing to requests from customers to send only white drivers (Thompson 2014a). The Asian taxi drivers of the firm reacted with fury to the actions of the owner and a spokesperson for the group commented that: ‘We have done nothing wrong but now we are being treated like paedophiles. You can’t tar us with the same brush.’ Though the taxi firm later reversed its decision (after all of the firm’s Asian taxi drivers walked out in protest), the initial decision of the owner
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could be seen as a reaction to the racialised and deviant construction of the Asian taxi driver (and, in this particular instance, an attempt to keep his customers happy by agreeing to their racist requests). This was not the first time that such an event had occurred.

For instance, The Telegraph reported that Rochdale Council employed teenagers to spy on taxi drivers (Ward 2013). The article did not specifically mention that Asian taxi drivers would be targeted but, suggestively, the picture accompanying the headline was of the faces of the eight Asian men jailed in Rochdale for sex offences, interspersed with a picture of a young white woman with her back turned. The activity was touted by Rochdale Council as an ‘intelligence gathering’ exercise, with the teenagers looking out for ‘inappropriate behaviour or language’. Like the actions of the taxi firm owner, Rochdale Council, itself under significant political and media pressure, may have succumbed to a crude form of racial profiling in attempting to seek out possible sex offenders. As a result of the anti-Muslim feeling that subsequently developed within Rochdale (partly due to events such as those detailed here), local people set up a group named Rochdale Muslim Community, highlighting the role that the media and politicians have played in stoking tensions within the town. In a press release they commented that:

Irresponsible comments from senior local and national politicians are aiding the negative portrayal of the Muslim community. Time and time again some politicians and the media have attempted to equate issues such as grooming and the Muslim community as being one and the same.  

(Thompson 2014b)

Feelings of criminalisation and alienation were also reported in interviews with second generation British Muslims from the Greater Manchester area. These interviews, seeking to examine British Muslims’ views and experiences of the concepts of ‘integration’ and ‘belonging’, coincided with the Rochdale ‘grooming’ scandal and this event and its fallout were mentioned by all participants. For example, Sharaz, a youth worker in his early thirties, spoke of the abuse suffered by Muslims through social media and of how realities such as this had affected his sense of belonging:

... if you go online and, because people can express their viewpoint anonymously now in this day in age by Twitter and Facebook, and anonymous comments on newspaper websites, you realise the depth of the hatred that people have against Muslims. And then obviously that combination of, you know, reading all the literature and the media and stuff. It makes you feel like you know what, you’re not really wanted.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by Shaukat, a 27-year old optician who, in referencing the Rochdale child abuse case, felt that the tag of ‘Muslim’ was inappropriately attached to incidents reported by the media when in fact this information was ‘irrelevant’. Imran, a thirty-one year old British-born teacher was also frustrated with the label of ‘Muslim’ being attached in popular discourse to the ‘grooming’ cases and he compared this to the reporting of child abuse within the church, which did not appear to carry the same stigma. 38-year old Rotherham resident and human resources professional Ahmed spoke of the racist, anti-Muslim backlash and of how this had directly impacted his family members:

One of my colleagues went to Alton Towers on the week of the Jay Report and someone called them ‘Rotherham paedos’. Things are said all the time. It’s ‘terrorist’ and that sort of thing. Young people feel quite ostracised because they get called all kinds of things,
especially at school. I know my nephew, who is at college now, spent a lot of time fighting just defending himself and before you know it, he is excluded and the other person is excluded. But that doesn’t help. It has impacted on his education.

Another familiar feature of the fallout of the Rotherham child abuse scandal has been the call, from non-Muslims and Muslims alike, to condemn the abuse. For instance, Nazir Afzal, the former Crown Prosecution Service lead on sexual violence against women and children, argued that there was no religious basis for the abuse carried out in Rotherham and that the role of ethnicity has been overplayed in the media (Gentleman 2014). However, Afzal did inform The Guardian reporter that he had hoped for more ‘vocal’ condemnation of the actions of the abusers. Amjad Bashir (2014), a former MEP for the populist anti-immigrant UKIP wrote in The Telegraph: ‘I am urging the community to get together to say these men do not represent us. They should be seen for what they are and held to account. We who come from Pakistan abhor and hold in contempt these people.’ This appeal for Pakistani or Muslim groups to apologise is typical of other calls made for these communities to condemn the behaviour of others that had nothing to do with them (Tufail and Poynting 2016).

The most severe impact on Muslim communities in Rotherham, however, has been the rapid increase of violent Islamophobia, culminating in the killing of local penisoner and visible Muslim, Mushin Ahmed. Ahmed was beaten to death by two white men while walking home from early morning prayers; his killers repeatedly referred to him as a ‘groomer’ during the assault and were both later convicted of his murder (Tufail 2018). Several interviewees referred to the climate of Islamophobia that had contributed to collectively blaming Rotherham’s Muslim communities for the child sexual abuse scandal, and of how this had been fanned by not only right-wing tabloid newspapers, but local elites including elected officials. This anti-Muslim abuse, often violent, affected not just local Muslim men, but women and children too in locations including schools, shopping centres, places of worship and the workplace.

Conclusion

The frequent calls for Muslim and Asian communities to apologise for and condemn the behaviour and activities of apparent members of those communities is not limited to recent examples following the child sexual exploitation scandals in Rotherham and Rochdale. Indeed, there have been repeated demands from newspapers, political figures and ‘community leaders’ compelling Muslims to speak out in opposition to events ranging from reports of British Muslims travelling to fight in Syria to allegations of ‘Islamist takeovers’ of schools. These demands are not simply spontaneous requests for an apology following a crime, atrocity or supposedly regressive practice: rather, they effectively serve as a ‘pledge of allegiance’ to the state, nation and the hegemonic order. This order, in which British Muslims occupy an inferior position to non-Muslim British citizens, is predicated on the extent to which an individual or community is ‘integrated’, or not. As Gargi Bhattacharyya (2008, p. 74) notes: ‘Minority communities are challenged to prove their allegiance and integration, however long they have been settled in the ‘host’ nation’. This is particularly the case with the Muslim communities of Britain who, for over a decade, have occupied a position as the dangerous minority and the primary subject group of counter-terrorism policy, legislation and state surveillance (Gilmore 2012; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). According to Bhattacharyya, the othering of the Muslim male has intensified through the period of the ‘war on terror’, with a focus on perceived (inferior) cultural difference and (illiberal) attitudes to sex:
The shift from what I am describing as ‘black’ to ‘brown’ myths is centred around the implied dangers of non-western cultures. There is a reworking of long-running racist myths – so the black rapist becomes the brown man from a backward and misogynistic culture, anti-feminist, sexually frustrated by traditional culture, addicted to honour killing and viewing women as tradable objects.

(Bhattacharyya 2008, p. 97)

That such representation has played out against the backdrop of Rotherham and Rochdale is beyond doubt. This is not, however, an isolated issue of a media hostile to minorities reporting similar cases of sexual violence towards women and young girls with alarming difference. Rather, as with the cases highlighted in this chapter, political figures and official reports have contributed greatly to rousing fears of a racialised threat of Muslim men towards white women. However, I argue that the anti-Muslim sentiment fostered in recent times is not simply the preserve of conservatives or of the far right. Following Kumar (2012, 2014), I contend that liberals and liberal institutions play a key role in furthering and legitimating anti-Muslim racism as evidenced by effectively correlating race and ethnicity to the sexual exploitation and violence cases in Rotherham and Rochdale. However, this is far from the only instance concerning Muslims to be exploited for political leverage. As Hussein and Poynting (2017) remind us, Islamophobia is now mainstream to the point of becoming ‘common-sense’, with a range of social and political issues including immigration, criminality and the treatment of women, examined and explained by regular reference to a supposedly degenerative Muslim culture. This chapter has demonstrated how Islamophobia at the level of media and politics has been effectively utilised to collectively blame and stigmatise whole Muslim communities for the crimes of a few, shifting national attention and public debate away from the core issues of violence against women and resulting in violent Islamophobia at the local level. Muslim ethnic groups in other parts of the world have also been racialised as violent sexual deviants in countries including France and Australia (Grewal 2012, 2017; Ticktin 2008) highlighting the globalised nature of contemporary Islamophobia. Within the context of Rotherham and Rochdale, the conjured image is of the dark Muslim male, sexually charged, violent, refusing to integrate and serving as an embodiment of a backward religion and dangerous, inferior culture. This (mis)representation, indulged in by far-right, conservative and liberal elites and institutions, has had serious and deleterious consequences for Muslim communities which have experienced isolation, alienation, racist attacks and criminalisation as a result.

References


The Rotherham and Rochdale abuse scandals


