

THE RACIALIZATION OF THE RAPE CRISIS? REVISITING BBC'S *THREE GIRLS* FOLLOWING BARONESS CASEY'S NATIONAL AUDIT ON GROUP-BASED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

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Abstract

This article examines the racialization of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) in the United Kingdom through an interdisciplinary analysis of Baroness Casey's National Audit and the BBC drama *Three Girls*. Situating both within wider political and cultural discourses, it explores how ethnicity is mobilized in policy, data collection and dissemination, and media representation. The article demonstrates that limited ethnicity data, alongside selective narrative emphasis, risks reinforcing racialized rape myths that construct non-white men as inherent sexual threats of white women and girls. It argues that such framings marginalize non-white victims, distort public understanding of CSEA, and undermine equitable justice responses.

Keywords: sexual offending; group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA); race; ethnicity; perpetration; victimization; interdisciplinary; socio-legal.

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[A] INTRODUCTION

In April 2023, former Home Secretary Suella Braverman wrote in the *Mail on Sunday* that grooming gangs in the United Kingdom (UK) were made up “almost entirely of British Pakistani” men (Owen 2023). She argued that British Pakistani men were responsible for sexual violence due to what she described as “cultural attitudes” that were fundamentally incompatible with British values. The press regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), later criticized these remarks (IPSO 2023). To state that a specific ethnic group has a cultural propensity to commit sexual offences is, according to IPSO, demonstrably false. Although the article was subsequently corrected and its comment section closed, it garnered a myriad of responses that collectively called for extreme punitive measures such as deportation, castration, and the return of capital punishment (Johnson 2025: 9).

The depiction of non-white men as inherent sexual threats is not a new phenomenon in British public debate. Another former Home Secretary, Priti Patel, defended the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 on social media site *X*. This piece of legislation, which permits the deportation of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants to offshore facilities in European and African countries, was viewed as way to protect women and girls by making it easier to deport those convicted of crimes including rape and sexual assault (Patel 2022). Under this logic, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 supposedly contributed to national efforts to tackle sexual violence (Johnson 2025: 9). While rape continues to be weaponized by government officials to rationalize oppressive immigration and border control policies, rape victims are failed at every stage of the criminal justice system (Johnson 2025: 10). In the same year that Patel made these statements, only 1.2% of reported rapes resulted in a charge (House of Commons (Home Affairs Committee) 2022).

The purpose of this article is to situate Baroness Casey’s National Audit on Group-Based Sexual Exploitation and Abuse within these wider political and cultural discourses. By analysing Baroness Casey’s audit (2025) alongside BBC’s *Three Girls* (Taylor 2017), the article examines how ethnicity is mobilized in media representation and policy discussions, shaping public perceptions of perpetrators and victims of child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse (CSEA). It provides a contained interdisciplinary critical evaluation that combines policy critique, discourse analysis, and a close textual reading of a television drama to examine how ethnicity is constructed across policy and media narratives. It would be indefensible to claim that Baroness Casey’s National Audit or

BBC's *Three Girls* actively promotes or endorses racism. Instead, what this article intends to more carefully accentuate is that the effects can oftentimes exceed authorial intention. They participate in and contribute to a wider representational field about race and sexual offending that has interpretive and ideological consequences.

[B] BARONESS CASEY'S NATIONAL AUDIT ON GROUP-BASED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

Context, purpose, and outcomes

In June 2025, Louise Casey (Baroness Casey of Blackstock) published the National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Commissioned by the Prime Minister and Home Secretary in February 2025, the audit was rapidly carried out over a three-month period in March, April, and May 2025. The purpose of the audit was to provide a comprehensive evaluation into the scale, nature, and drivers of group-based CSEA at a local and national level. The audit reviewed existing data, empirical evidence, and testimonials to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding of these heinous crimes. It sought to present a thorough picture of the current landscape of group-based sexual offending against children, scrutinize the available datasets in this field, and develop a series of implementable recommendations. When actioned, the desired outcome of these recommendations is to ensure robust prevention of group-based CSEA by promoting cross-agency collaboration, strengthening mechanisms of redress for victims, and supporting the effective investigation and prosecution of perpetrators. This government-sanctioned audit can therefore serve as a meaningful evidence base for prevention, early intervention, and disruption of group-based CSEA. Additionally, it is likely to produce significant advances in policy development, risk and vulnerability identification, safeguarding procedures, and targeted responses to perpetration.

Recommendations

The report concludes by setting out 12 recommendations (Casey 2025: 150-154). In its response, the Government has accepted each recommendation (Home Office 2026).

- 1 The law in England and Wales should be changed so adults who intentionally penetrate the vagina, anus or mouth of a child under 16 receive mandatory charges of rape. This recommendation also

suggests the implementation of a “Romeo and Juliet clause” that prevents criminalizing teenagers in sexual relationships with each other.

- 2 A national police operation and national inquiry (co-ordinating a series of targeted investigations) should be launched into CSEA in England and Wales.
- 3 To review the criminal convictions of child sexual exploitation. To quash any convictions where the Government finds victims were criminalized instead of protected. This recommendation directly responds to the poor treatment of victims. Notably, there were situations where victims were investigated, arrested, and prosecuted for matters directly linked to their abuse.
- 4 The Government should make mandatory the collection of ethnicity and nationality data for all suspects in CSEA cases. The Government should also work with police to improve the collection of ethnicity data for victims.
- 5 Mandatory sharing of information should be enforced between all statutory safeguarding partners in cases of CSEA. Compliance should be monitored by the inspectorates and overseen by the proposed Child Protection Authority.
- 6 The Department for Education should introduce unique reference numbers for children to improve opportunities for agencies to share information about vulnerable children at risk of child sexual abuse.
- 7 Police information systems should be upgraded and enable the use of unique reference numbers for children introduced by the Department for Education.
- 8 CSEA investigations should be approached like serious and organized crime.
- 9 The Department for Education should interrogate child protection data to identify the causes of the decline in CSEA representation in “child in need” assessment data, examine the reasons for variations across local authorities, and review the effectiveness of Serious Incident Notifications in relation to CSEA.
- 10 The Government should commission research into the drivers for group-based CSEA, including online offending, cultural factors and the role of the “group”.
- 11 The Department for Transport should stop “out of area” taxis and implement rigorous statutory standards for local authority licensing and the regulation of taxi drivers. This is because the report uncovered how taxis sometimes facilitate human trafficking

by transporting children across different geographical areas for the purposes of CSEA.

- 12 The Government should commit to fully resourcing the implementation of these recommendations over multiple years, track their implementation across departments and other organizations, and ensure reports are regularly submitted to Parliament.

Many of these recommendations speak to critical issues such as rectifying poor treatment of victims and advancing cross-agency collaboration. The recommendation advocating for a universal, blanket enforcement of the age of consent, which is aimed at resolving inconsistent application of rape charges where an adult has sexual intercourse with a child between the ages of 13 and 15, is particularly welcomed (Casey 2025: 143-145). However, certain recommendations remain a cause for concern. In particular, the mandatory recording of ethnicity for perpetrators is troubling when similar data collection for victims is not required (Casey 2025: 152). This is disappointing when such valuable data could be used to identify and address unique barriers faced by racialized victims navigating the criminal justice system including racism, cultural factors, language barriers, religious customs, and immigration status (Gangoli & Ors 2020).

Emphasis on the ethnicity of offenders without comparable attention to victims risks creating a disproportionate emphasis on perpetrators of group-based CSEA from particular backgrounds while continuing the marginalization and erasure of those harmed (Cockbain & Tufail 2020). It also risks a potential hyper-fixation on a specific racial combination of rape, namely a non-white perpetrator and a white victim, rather than addressing broader patterns of predatory behaviour and victimization that are constituent components of *all* CSEA cases.

Ethnicity

A central element of this national audit was to assess what is known about the demographics of so-called “grooming gangs” and their victims, including *ethnicity*. Baroness Casey concedes within the audit that, while the concept of “grooming gangs” is a feature of public discourse that exists within the popular imaginary and collective consciousness, it is not a defined legal category or capturable by any national data collection system (Casey 2025: 49). Nonetheless, this term is used in the report and coupled with “Asian” and “Pakistani”. The use of ethnicity as a focal analytical point was justified in the report as a concern about over-representation of Asian, Muslim, and Pakistani men as perpetrators of

this type of sexual offending (Casey 2025: 8). While the majority of CSEA offenders are white men, the report advanced the following argument:

In a population of over 80% of people of White ethnicity, it should always be a significant issue when people from a White background are not in the majority of victims or perpetrators of crime ... [I]t does no community any good to ignore disproportion[ality] in any form of offending (Casey 2025: 128, 126, original emphasis).

According to the title of section 6.2.4, “ethnicity matters” (Casey 2025: 128). Within this section, the audit argues that race and ethnicity, as a feature of group-based CSEA, cannot be shied away from and to do so, as institutions have historically done so as to avoid uncomfortable conversations, would be an affront to public conscience and justice. The report also cautions that it is “at best misleading” to claim that the majority of group-based CSEA is committed by white men—even if true (Casey 2025: 128). It is of course necessary to acknowledge that some non-white men have committed serious sexual offences against children, and it would be wrongful to deny this. However, it is equally important to consider the broader implications of how this fact is interpreted and represented. Prior to situating the retort that “ethnicity matters” within broader discourses of racialization, moral panics, and racialized rape myths that characterize non-white men as sexual threats, it is important to evaluate how ethnicity is handled within the audit itself.

Data limitations

The audit declared considerable limitations in the datasets regarding ethnicity (Casey 2025: 122). It is true to acknowledge there are serious constraints when trying to access, report, and interpret reliable empirical data from the Police National Database and the Ministry of Justice. This significantly impedes academic scholarship from conducting rigorous evidence-based research into race, sexual offending, and racial disparities in criminal justice responses thereto (Johnson 2025: 205).

The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) has initiated steps to enhance the data collection of victim and perpetrator ethnicity in CSEA cases. Key initiatives include the annual publication by the NPCC’s Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP) and the development of the Complex Organized Child Abuse Dataset (COCAD), part of the Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce led by the Hydrant Programme.

However, a large percentage of the ethnicity data remains unknown because it has simply not been collected at point of entry. Ethnicity was only recorded on 35% of victims in the data published in 2024 by the VKPP (2025: 14). Moreover, COCAD identified that, in 2023, 53% of

victim ethnicity was unknown. In the context of perpetrator ethnicity, the data is as equally unreliable (Casey 2025: 72). The COCAD data reveals that 88% of group-based CSEA offenders are white only when unknown ethnicity data is excluded. When unknown ethnicity data is included, this falls to 28% (Casey 2025: 75). With confidence, it can be stated that at least 28% of group-based CSEA offenders are white. However, it cannot be definitively concluded that 88% are white overall. Despite limitations in the quality and quantity of ethnicity data, Baroness Casey's audit attempts to evaluate the available data pertaining to the ethnicity of perpetrators and victims.

Ethnicity of perpetrators

National data on the ethnicity of suspects in CSEA cases is currently inadequate. Data collected via self-identification or police officer-assessed ethnic appearance is inconsistent and incomplete, making it unreliable for drawing conclusions about the ethnicity of group-based offenders of CSEA.

The 2025 VKPP report recorded ethnicity for only 31% of perpetrators (VKPP 2025: 14). Of this 31% where perpetrator ethnicity was recorded:

- ◇ 88% are white;
- ◇ 5% are Asian;
- ◇ 3% are Black;
- ◇ 2% are Mixed;
- ◇ and 1% are Chinese or other ethnic group (VKPP 2025: 31).

Similarly, the November 2024 COCAD report published self-identified ethnicity for all group-based CSEA crimes in 2023. Among the 34% of perpetrators for whom ethnicity was recorded, the figures reveal that:

- ◇ 88% are white;
- ◇ 7% are Asian;
- ◇ 5% are Black;
- ◇ 3% are Mixed;
- ◇ and 2% are Other (Casey 2025: 75).

While the available data may appear to suggest relatively low levels of non-white offending of CSEA, the comprehensive timeline set out in Baroness Casey's report in section 2.2 indicates a growing focus on ethnicity over time (Casey 2025: 24-41). From 2009 to 2025, increasing attention is paid to the ethnicity of perpetrators of CSEA by politicians, agencies, policymakers, criminal justice agents, journalists such as Andrew Norfolk (2011), and television programmes.

Concurrent to this increased attention was a spate of high-profile investigations and prosecutions, including cases of CSEA in Derbyshire, Rotherham, Rochdale, Telford, Oxford, Peterborough, Bristol, and Huddersfield. Many offenders, as part of these highly publicized convictions, were British Pakistani or of an alternative Asian ethnic background. For example, in 2011, 11 men of predominantly British Pakistani heritage were convicted of multiple sexual crimes against 26 teenage girls as part of Operation Retriever. In 2012, as part of Operation Span, nine men of Asian ethnicity were convicted in Rochdale for a series of sexual offences including rape, human trafficking, and conspiracy to engage in sexual activity with a child. In 2013, seven British Pakistani men were convicted in Oxford for rape, human trafficking, and facilitating prostitution as part of Operation Bullfinch. In 2014, as part of Operation Brooke, seven Somali men were convicted of multiple sexual offences against children. Between 2014 and 2015, 10 men of Asian and Eastern European background were convicted of 59 sexual offences against multiple children as part of Operation Erle. Comparably, there was no reference to the white ethnicity of eight men convicted in 2025 of multiple sexual offences against a child between the ages of 13 and 15, including rape. Together, these examples illustrate a pattern in which the ethnicity of some offenders is prominently noted, while in other cases ethnicity—particularly if white—is regarded as less important and remains unremarked upon. This shapes public understanding of CSEA in ways that do not reflect the full evidential landscape.

Ethnicity of victims

The final *Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse* (IICSA) published in October 2022, when discussing victim compensation schemes and adequate financial investment in support services and charitable resources, commented that ethnicity of victims was rarely recorded. The IICSA highlights this as an inadequacy. Citing the inquiry’s “Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks Investigation Report” (February 2022), the IICSA problematized the inquiry’s widespread failures to collect victim ethnicity data across six case-study areas, including Rochdale and Rotherham. As a result of this paucity, police and other agencies are unable to identify patterns of CSEA in respect of ethnicity and cannot effectively tailor mechanisms of redress that allow for racial, religious, and cultural particularities.

Despite nearly two-thirds of victim ethnicity data being unknown, according to the available victim ethnicity data within the VKPP report:

- ◇ 87% of recorded victims self-identified as white or white British;
- ◇ 4% as Black or Black British;
- ◇ 4% as Asian or Asian British;
- ◇ 3% as Chinese or other ethnic group; and
- ◇ 3% as mixed.

The VKPP report compares these figures with Crime Survey and Census ethnicity data. It observes that white British victims remained the most common self-identified ethnicity group, while Asian or Asian British victims continue to be under-represented as victims of CSEA relative to their representation as victims in other types of crimes.

Additionally, Greater Manchester Police provided the audit with localized data across a three-year period from January 2022 to May 2025, which included 35 group-based CSEA operations. Within these 35 investigations, there are 317 recorded victims. The victim ethnicity data that is available demonstrates that 94% of victims are white, 3% are Asian, 2% are Black, and 1% are other (Casey 2025: 72).

Similarly to the VKPP report and Greater Manchester Police, the COCAD report into group-based CSEA demonstrates similar patterns of under-representation of non-white victims. According to COCAD, within the 47% of victims where ethnicity is discernible:

- ◇ 85% of recorded victims self-identified as white;
- ◇ 4% as Black;
- ◇ 4% as mixed;
- ◇ 4% as other ethnic group; and
- ◇ 3% as Asian.

Notably, Baroness Casey's audit reconfigured COCAD's dataset. When victims whose ethnicity is unknown is included in the percentage calculations, the figures changed significantly. With this unknown data incorporated, white victims represent only 39% of all victims (Casey 2025: 72). This suggests that non-white victims are likely to be far more impacted than existing data shows. Baroness Casey's fourth recommendation to only mandatorily record the ethnicity of perpetrators and not victims risks widening this gap, further limiting understanding of victim demographics and potentially undermining equitable support.

This imbalance is not merely a technical issue of missing or erroneous data. It has practical implications for how sexual violence is made visible, interpreted, and narrated within popular discourse. Therefore, the discussion must shift from the methodological issues arising from

unavailable ethnicity data to the interpretive and ideological work that such incomplete datasets can perform. Selective visibility of perpetrator ethnicity, combined with the systematic absence or uncertainty of victim ethnicity, creates conditions in which racialized narratives of sexual violence can be amplified.

[C] RACIALIZED RAPE MYTHS: CONSTRUCTIONS OF PERPETRATION AND VICTIMHOOD

“Asian grooming gangs”: a UK variant of “the myth of the Black rapist”

In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis writes extensively about “the myth of the Black rapist”—a figure historically constructed to legitimize racial terror, segregation, and the exertion of racial hierarchies. The myth depicts Black men as violent, predatory, and brutish rapists of white women. The monolithic centring of white womanhood as victimhood contributes, in turn, to the devaluation of Black women as “unrapeable” (Davis 1983: 191; hooks 1982). Although this myth belongs to a distinct racial genealogy and geography that goes beyond the scope of this article, Davis’s analysis offers a useful analytical framework to understand constructions of perpetration and victimhood.

In the UK context, narratives around “Asian grooming gangs” similarly emphasize specific racialized combinations: non-white men as perpetrators of sex crimes against white women and girls. As Ella Cockbain and Waqas Tufail observe, the overwhelming focus on Asian men abusing white girls risks erasing victims outside of this narrow paradigm and overlooking other offenders (Cockbain & Tufail 2020: 15). Figures such as Tommy Robinson exemplify this. Robinson has positioned CSEA as his central political issue, securing appointments such as “special personal advisor on rape gangs” to the leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and speaking on “grooming gangs” in the Czech Parliament (Cockbain & Tufail 2020: 9). Yet his authority is largely performative: he is neither a subject matter expert nor a champion for victims. Repeatedly, his outspoken focus on CSEA excludes offences committed by members within his own English Defence League network (*The Independent* 2018).

“Group” and “gang” are synonyms

Some unique particularities emerge in the distinctive racialization process for Pakistani, Muslim, and Asian men—especially in relation to *group-*

based offending. One significant difference between “the myth of the Black rapist” and “Asian grooming gangs” is the role of the group (Johnson 2025: 160). Gang discourse extends culpability beyond individual perpetrators and projects it onto an imagined homogeneous community. It implies not only coordinated offending, but a shared cultural motivation rooted in ethnicity and religion.

As Gargi Bhattacharyya and colleagues contend, the figure of the “Asian grooming gang” draws upon historic Orientalist constructions of non-white masculinity as hypersexual, patriarchal, culturally regressive, and inherently threatening (Bhattacharyya & Ors 2021: 114-116). The term “gang” performs significant ideological labour in this context. It does not simply denote co-offending or collaborative criminal activity; rather, it invokes a racialized “folk devil”. Claire Alexander’s influential analysis of the “Asian gang”, which emerged in public discourse between the 1970s and 1990s, demonstrates how young South Asian men were cast as embodiments of deviancy and cultural incompatibility (Alexander 2000: xiii). In this formulation, the “Asian gang” was not merely a representation of incivility, but a criminal set marked by racial difference and an alleged opacity or unknowability that rendered it fundamentally outside the national community.

The contemporary “Asian grooming gang” revives this earlier figure in an explicitly sexualized register (Cockbain 2013). The shift from representations of street violence to those of sexual predation does not disrupt the underlying racial logic. Instead, it intensifies it. The label “gang” transforms what are, in legal and criminological terms, networks or groups into collective embodiments of racial pathology. In this sense, “group” and “gang” operate as rhetorical equivalents, but only in selective and racialized ways. When white men commit sexual offences together, media accounts frequently describe them as “friends” (or part of a “friendship circle”) and “a group” (Humphries & Roughley 2025). By contrast, when the accused are Pakistani or Muslim, “gang” becomes the dominant descriptor. The distinction is not merely semantic; it is racialized. “Gang” connotes organized deviance embedded in cultural identity, fusing criminality with ethnicity and transforming individual wrongdoing into evidence of collective sexual transgression.

This discursive process produces two interrelated effects. Firstly, it casts British Pakistani men *en masse* as sexually deviant subjects, imagined as driven by a culturally specific desire for white girls. Secondly, it recentres whiteness as the paradigmatic site of victimhood. In a manner reminiscent of “the myth of the Black rapist”, white femininity becomes

hypervisible or exceptional, while other victims are rendered peripheral or invisible.

The consequences of this framing are tangible. The focus on Asian men abusing white girls obscures the demographic complexity of child sexual exploitation in the UK, where both perpetrators and victims come from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds. It also marginalizes South Asian and Muslim girls who experience sexual abuse, often within familial or community settings, yet struggle to secure recognition within a public discourse that casts their communities solely as sites of perpetration.

The racialization of the term “gang”, therefore, does more than describe crime; it constructs a moral panic. It reactivates longstanding narratives of racial threat, reframes them through the lens of sexual danger, and consolidates a hierarchy of victimhood in which white girls are imagined as uniquely vulnerable. In this way, the “Asian grooming gang” functions less as a neutral criminological category than as a cultural myth that maintains broader projects of racial boundary-making and exclusion.

If the “Asian grooming gang” operates as a cultural myth that exceeds its criminological referent, then it is through media and cultural representation that this myth acquires affective momentum. Moral panics do not circulate in the abstract; they are mediated, dramatized, and rendered emotionally legible through news reporting, political speech, and popular culture. Television drama occupies a powerful position in shaping public imagination, translating complex legal cases into intimate and accessible stories. To this end, television dramas operate as cultural artefacts that both capture and shape the values of their time. They do not simply mirror debates surrounding ethnicity, crime, and victimhood in cases of CSEA; they actively contribute to sustaining them. It is within this context that the BBC’s *Three Girls* must be situated: not simply as a retelling of events in Rochdale, but as a cultural site in which questions of race are negotiated.

[D] REVISITING BBC'S *THREE GIRLS*: A CULTURAL SITE THAT SEES JUSTICE DONE, OR AN ENTRENCHMENT OF BARONESS CASEY'S STATEMENT THAT "ETHNICITY MATTERS"?

Setting the scene

The highly acclaimed and BAFTA award-winning BBC drama *Three Girls* originally aired over three consecutive nights from 16-18 May 2017 on BBC One. Written by Nicole Taylor and directed by Philippa Lowthorpe, the three-part series dramatized the rape, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, sexual assault, and trafficking of children by groups of predatory men in the Rochdale area. The series highlighted the difficulty victims encountered when navigating the criminal justice system, including flawed policing strategies and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decision-making processes. The drama also critiqued the embedded institutional failings and sense of inertia that enabled cases of CSEA to take place over several years without effective intervention.

With a score of 100% on Rotten Tomatoes, a popularist website that collates reviews of film and television, the series was universally recognized as a critical success. The storytelling, acting performances by its cast, and sensitive directorial approach were praised as "powerful", "unflinching", "extraordinarily brave" in reviews by *The Guardian* (Ellis-Peterson 2017) and the *Irish Times* (Crawley 2017). Maxine Peake was particularly lauded for her performance as Sara Rowbotham MBE, a sexual health support worker who gathered substantial volumes of evidence that helped Greater Manchester Police convict nine male perpetrators of sexual offences against children in Rochdale.

The drama was based on a real case involving the following perpetrators convicted of group-based CSEA who were named in the series: Shabir Ahmed, Kabeer Hassan, Abdul Aziz, Abdul Rauf, Mohammed Sajid, Adil Khan, Mohammed Amin, Abdul Qayyum, and Hamid Safi (*R v Ahmed (Shabir)* 2014). The victims, by contrast, were appropriately anonymized through the creation of three fictional characters—Holly Winshaw, Amber Bowen, and Ruby Bowen. Crucially, their on-screen experiences were grounded in extensive research and personal testimonies. The series ultimately functions as a cultural and visual representation of justice in cases of CSEA, making the systemic failures, the victims' resilience, and the legal outcomes accessible and impactful to a broad audience.

Episode one

The first episode begins in a police interview room. Two male officers are present and are sat opposite a traumatized and visibly injured 15-year-old girl, Holly, alongside her father acting as the appropriate adult. Holly has been arrested on suspicion of causing criminal damage to the glass counter of a local takeaway shop and stealing two cans of a fizzy drink. From this bold opening gambit, it is derivable that victims are being mistaken as criminals. What commences is a harrowing 50-minute-long depiction of rape, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, and trafficking of children told from the perspective of the three focal victims—Holly, Amber, and Ruby.

Holly has recently moved into the Rochdale area following either an eviction or repossession of their family home. During this period marked by financial instability, unsettled accommodation, and a loving but tense homelife, Holly befriends sisters Amber (aged 15) and Ruby (aged 13). Amber introduces Holly to a group of older men who work at Top Curry, a local kebab takeaway shop. The men initially appear as friendly, supplying unlimited free food, alcohol, and cigarettes. In some ways, it can be read as a sense of community-building. From the vantage point of Holly, Amber, and Ruby these men provide a space to socialize and, with the help of alcohol, escape troubling life circumstances.

The escalation of the men's aggressive, violent, and sexually coercive behaviour, though it may seem rapid in the first half of the episode, is part of a calculated, gradual, and insidious process. In a deeply upsetting scene, Holly is raped by Shabir Ahmed (colloquially known as "Daddy"). This violation is immediately followed by threats of violence that intimidate Holly into remaining silent about the abuse she is suffering. In the aftermath of the rape, Amber comforts Holly. She provides advice about not letting the men touch her or kiss her, implying Amber is also being subjected to horrendous acts of sexual violence. Defenceless and isolated, Holly's mental and physical health deteriorates as she is raped and sexually assaulted repeatedly by groups of men. Emblematic of a wider network of abuse that transcends the geographical area of Rochdale, Holly, Amber, and Ruby are transported, in taxis, to flats in different locations where they are raped and sexually abused by multiple perpetrators.

The vulnerability of these girls is explored in an honest and unyielding way. Ruby has severe learning differences and struggles to understand the intentions of the adults around her, making her particularly susceptible to manipulation and exploitation. This would explain her closeness

with a much older boyfriend, “Billy”/“Bilal”, with whom she regularly has sexual intercourse. Amber, while slightly older, is similarly drawn into dangerous situations, seeking acceptance and a sense of belonging. Amber also feels she is somewhat in control of her situation owing to her relationship with “Tariq”, a ringleader of this operation. We, as viewers, of course know that Amber is terrified, trapped, and powerless. Holly, new to the area and lacking a stable support network, is quickly ensnared in this already well-established cycle of sexual exploitation and abuse.

The three girls regularly attend a local sexual health service, run diligently by dedicated front-line support workers such as Sara Rowbotham. Sara repeatedly tries to share the breadth of information she has collected in her role (including names, addresses, and licence plates of perpetrators) with other agencies, including the police and social services. However, she receives constant push-back owing to children’s “chaotic” lives. They are adultified as “streetwise” and perceived as complicit in their own abuse for accepting money in exchange for sex and returning to the perpetrators despite police intervention.

The episode ends bleakly. Holly, now pregnant as a byproduct of rape, manages to escape the situation with the help of her father. But there is no support from specialist agencies to navigate a long and gruelling road of trauma recovery. Amber and Ruby, with no parent outside to help, remain trapped in a house that facilitates their sexual abuse—a metaphor for their overall lack of agency.

Episode two

The second episode concentrates on institutional failings and the systemic obstacles experienced by victims of CSEA. Amber, arrested at age 15 for allegedly inciting other girls into prostitution, is isolated in a mother-and-baby unit while the perpetrators continue to move freely. Ruby is revealed to be pregnant, and her foetus is seized by authorities without her knowledge. This reveals how flawed policing investigative strategies further traumatize and violate victims. Meanwhile, Holly carries her child to term and later achieves academic success. She passes her GCSEs, opening opportunities to study A Levels and attend university.

Sara continues her tireless investigation, often working independently of the police, documenting multiple instances of sexual violence. Despite her efforts, the CPS initially cites insufficient evidence to proceed. Following the decision to not prosecute, the men continue to sexually abuse vulnerable children. Over a year later, Operation Span re-engages with the case and exposes extensive networks of CSEA. Victims are repeatedly subjected to re-traumatization as they navigate psychologically

taxing processes including interviews and photo identifications. Holly, destabilized by this process, loses custody of her child. This underscores the emotional cost of seeking justice.

The episode also depicts a fractious relationship between victims and the police. It captures the genuine anger and sense of betrayal felt by the girls. The police oftentimes refused files containing critical intelligence, treating referrals by Sara from sexual health services as merely information rather than adducible evidence. Strategic decisions about which victims to involve as witnesses further compound feelings of injustice, leaving some girls—particularly Amber—marginalized.

Despite these obstacles, legal action progresses under the guidance of Nazir Afzal as the Chief Prosecutor at the CPS for North West England. Charges are agreed for Holly and Ruby, but not Amber. This is because she is deemed too “unsympathetic” to put before a jury. Such a maddening decision reveals the complex questions surrounding victim status and credibility. Amber is in some ways a microcosm of broader conversations about “ideal” or “credible” victims and the lack of redress available for those who fall beyond this narrow construct. The treatment of Amber reveals how institutional processes, shaped by entrenched bias, stigma, and prejudice, can reproduce forms of secondary victimization and fail those they are meant to protect. The episode closes on a sobering note: while awaiting the trial, the girls’ lives remain suspended in trauma. Their memories are mechanically extracted, at great personal cost, just to be treated as evidence.

Episode three

The third episode opens not with a victim, but with a building—Liverpool Crown Court. The trial begins. Protesters gather behind police barriers, clutching placards that read “Public enquiry now”, “Rapists out”, and “Justice for OUR children” as Union Jack flags ripple. National coverage, including live reporting by the BBC, reflects the intense public scrutiny surrounding the case and loud demands for accountability. In Rochdale, the fallout is palpable as community tensions simmer, trust in institutions erodes, and everyday interactions—from taxi rides to takeaway deliveries—become fraught with suspicion.

Inside the courtroom, the nine defendants sit beside each other. Each is represented by their own legal counsel, requiring the witnesses to undergo nine different cross-examinations. Holly, now 19, is the first witness for the Crown. Afforded special measures, Holly gives evidence via a live video link. Her testimony recounts the progression from friendship to acts of sexual violence. The courtroom hears how she froze, dissociated,

and complied out of fear. Cross-examination is relentless in their attempt to undermine her credibility. Each defence barrister scrutinizes her background, suggesting that she was promiscuous, drank alcohol excessively to the point of dependency, and behaved anti-socially. Rape myths are reproduced in courtroom speak as questions focus on why she did not physically resist or shout louder for help while being raped, reflecting familiar patterns of victim-blaming. Holly remains resolute, insisting she did nothing wrong and has nothing to be ashamed of.

Ruby, now 16, is the second witness for the Crown. Via video link she speaks about a relationship she believed was loving, describing affection alongside exploitation. This demonstrates how sexually coercive behaviour operates to create the illusion of consent. Cross-examination probes inconsistencies in her statements as counsel insist that she was deliberately deceptive about her age. Parallel to the courtroom, Amber is alone and ruminating with the decision to exclude her from proceedings as a victim. Instead, she does feature on the indictment as a more palatable way to admit her evidence. Her interviews, delving into unbearably painful lived experiences, are referenced in court only to show her as complicit and describe how she facilitated contact between victims and abusers.

After weeks of testimony, the jury delivers unanimous guilty verdicts on all charges including rape. Holly regains custody of her daughter and reconnects with her family. Ruby, decimated in cross-examination, is vindicated. But the episode ends on a reflective note, acknowledging that while convictions mark accountability, they do not erase the harm or resolve the exclusion felt by survivors like Amber.

Ethnicity as an ancillary character

Nicole Taylor, the writer of *Three Girls*, claimed that she approached the portrayal of ethnicity in cases of group-based CSEA cautiously. Aware that the drama had potential to incite racial hatred against Asian communities, Taylor did not want to platform far-right extremist attitudes about sexual offending. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Taylor made assurances that *Three Girls* does not platform racist viewpoints and does not provide the English Defence League with an opportunity to exploit sexual crimes committed against children (Ellis-Peterson 2017).

Yet, in *Three Girls*, ethnicity functions less as background context and more as an ancillary character: always present, ever-shaping interactions, structuring perception, and animating tension even when not explicitly named. It would be an indefensible claim to suggest that the series endorses racism or decisively entrenches racialized representation

of group-based CSEA. However, it does participate in the reproduction of racialized representation of sexual offending. Accordingly, race operates *dramaturgically* in a way that overloads the senses.

Sensorially, the series persistently codes difference. The visual juxtaposition of white victims against identifiably Asian men establishes a clear racialized binary from the outset. Linguistically, the ethnicity of the perpetrators is reiterated overtly with intentional naming conventions and the use of racial slurs to malign them. Descriptions of their “curry-like” smell are used to evoke disgust. Takeaway shops such as “Top Curry” and “Speedy Kebab” become recurring backdrops to abuse, embedding exploitation within culturally marked spaces. When perpetrators speak in another language, subtitles of untranslated dialogue simply read “speaks in a different language”, amplifying alterity and contrast. Religion is also treated as a marker of ethnic identity where alcohol functions symbolically: they supply it, yet do not drink it. The abstention is framed not as piety, but as strategic control that reinforces a perception of calculated predation. The vilification of Asian men as a sexually predatory group extends to the Chief Prosecutor, Nazir Afzal, who is mistaken for a perpetrator outside the courtroom. While it is difficult to verify the accuracy of this scene, it identifies the overt racial tensions at play. Inside the courtroom, inappropriate and crude jokes about “small” Asian men (in height and penis size) infiltrate legalese. These choices do not merely depict ethnicity; they meticulously *stage* it.

Contrasting the overtly racialized perpetrators, Holly, Amber, and Ruby are white. Their ethnicity is not strictly foregrounded in dialogue because it does not need to be; it operates as the invisible norm against which racial difference is measured. Jenny Sharpe observes that, in the aftermath of the rape of a white woman by a non-white man, “the brutalized bodies of defenseless English women serve as a metonym for a government that sees itself as the violated object” (Sharpe 1993: 7). This is particularly evident in the protest scene outside the courtroom in episode three. Placards that read “Justice for OUR girls”, “Rapists out”, and “Our girls are not halal meat” as Union Jack flags fly proudly in the background. This depiction contributes to interpretive or ideological effects that frame the girls’ suffering as a national injury. The microcosm of a raped white girl is macrocosmic of a nation’s breached borders, and the trial (and subsequent removal of their citizenship in *Aziz v Secretary of State* 2018) operates as a symbolic restoration of state authority.

The drama itself did not necessarily intend these effects, nor did it likely mean to shape the viewers’ thought processes in this way. It is entirely

plausible that the inclusion of these slogans on the placards was simply an attempt to reflect reality with factual accuracy. However, the wording on these placards does carry ideological weight. The phrase “our girls are not halal meat” intensifies nationalist and racialized logic. As David Gurnham notes, the use of the word “meat” presents white girls as something to be devoured, consumed, and destroyed while simultaneously constructing Asian men as animalistic, carnivorous, and cannibalistic (Gurnham 2014: 81-82). The metaphor of “halal meat” reduces sexual violence to racialized rhetoric, invoking imagery of consumption, violation, and annihilation. Within this framework, white female victimhood is mobilized as part of a broader cultural narrative of invasion and national defence. By staging this slogan so prominently, the series inadvertently reinforces racialized rape myths, intensifying a discourse in which sexual violence is interpreted and understood primarily through a flawed patriotic logic of a racialized threat.

A consequence of the drama’s monolithic centring of white womanhood as victimhood is the erasure of non-white victims of CSEA. Shabir Ahmed was later convicted of 30 counts of rape against a young Asian girl (Carter 2012). However, this is absent from the drama. The omission is significant. By pairing a non-white perpetrator and white victim, the series consolidates a culturally familiar script in which harm flows in one racial direction. The existence of an Asian victim unsettles this binary. It reveals that sexual violence within these networks was not exclusively targeted at white girls and group-based CSEA cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of racialized desire. Without her story, representation is skewed. The absence reinforces a hierarchy of visibility in which white suffering is nationally legible, while non-white suffering is marginalized. As a result, the drama reproduces the racialized rape myths it seeks to handle cautiously, and risks presenting ethnicity as an explanatory axis of group-based CSEA. By omitting Asian victimhood, the series narrows the scope of public empathy and inadvertently sustains a racialized template of who counts as the “ideal” victim within the popular imaginary, despite scrutinizing this concept within the drama itself.

Three Girls operates as a cultural site of racialized rape mythmaking, constructing ethnicity as a highly visible axis of meaning in the context of group-based CSEA. By singularly platforming a specific racial combination of rape (a non-white perpetrator and a white victim), it adds to a cultural canon that perpetuates the marginalization of non-white victims and the obfuscation of white perpetrators of group-based CSEA. This is perhaps most starkly evidenced in a scene from episode one. Ruby discloses that her boyfriend, Billy/Bilal, filmed her dancing

naked and uploaded it to the internet. As a result, Ruby claims she is now “famous in Pakistan”. This is where the interpretive and ideological work commences. Her abuse is imagined as travelling transnationally; her white body rendered consumable by an unseen, distant, non-white audience. Pakistan becomes less a real place than a symbolic “elsewhere”, invoked to suggest a shared and collective cultural appetite for young white girls. This comment also territorializes sexual deviance across an entire geographic space. The remark, while supposed to be flippant, is richly loaded with meaning and projects sexual danger outward onto a diasporic landscape. While the drama seeks to narrate justice and raise awareness about the obstacles that victims of CSEA encounter, it also reinforces Baroness Casey’s assertion that “ethnicity matters”. In *Three Girls*, ethnicity is never just context; it is both dramatized and instrumentalized, shaping audience understanding of perpetration and victimhood within the popular imaginary.

[E] CONCLUSION

This article has revisited BBC’s *Three Girls* in the context of Baroness Casey’s National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, examining how race and ethnicity are mobilized within policy discourse and media representation. The series highlights systemic failings in the treatment of victims while simultaneously reproducing culturally entrenched narratives that exceptionalize white female victimhood and racialize non-white men as predatory sexual threats. By depicting the racial combination of non-white perpetrator and white victim as it does, *Three Girls* reflects and reinforces a broader cultural template in which ethnicity becomes both an explanatory device and a normative lens through which sexual violence is understood.

The audit highlights the limitations and complexities of existing data. Ethnicity is inconsistently and inadequately recorded for both victims and perpetrators, producing a partial and potentially misleading picture of group-based CSEA. Casey’s fourth recommendation, which mandates the recording of perpetrator ethnicity without a corresponding requirement for victim ethnicity, intensifies this problem. Comprehensive data on victim ethnicity could reveal the specific barriers faced by racialized survivors and inform the development of effective mechanisms to better support them.

Cultural representations of group-based CSEA can simultaneously educate and mislead. *Three Girls* raises awareness of systemic injustices while reproducing racialized rape myths. As argued, *Three Girls* does not

endorse racism in any simple sense. By dramaturgically staging race as it chooses to do so, it conjures within it a wider representational field that produces ideological and interpretive consequences. In this sense, its effects exceed authorial intention.

Recognizing these complex dynamics is crucial for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars aiming to address the full spectrum of CSEA. This ensures equitable treatment of all victims, regardless of race, gender, or social positioning. Ultimately, the convergence of media, law, and race in the UK context underscores the urgent need for a nuanced, evidence-based, and interdisciplinary approach to understanding, preventing, and responding to group-based CSEA.

About the author

Dr Megan Johnson is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Greenwich. Megan is an interdisciplinary sexual violence scholar whose work is informed by Black and indigenous feminist theory. Routinely, the problem of rape is weaponized by political and legal actors in ways that perpetuate racialized myths which undermine the efficacy of rape law's operationalization. To locate and challenge this, her doctoral research evaluated the role of race in English and Welsh rape law and criminal justice responses thereto. More broadly, her work focuses on sexual offending, rape trials, and domestic violence.

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