Unpacking the 'Grooming Gangs' Conspiracy | Community Policy Speaks Podcast Episode 21 - YouTube

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Transcript:
[Music] Hello there and welcome to Community Policy Speaks, our podcast here at the Community Policy Forum. The Community Policy Forum is an independent think tank seeking to promote evidence-based and community-centered approaches to policymaking surrounding the structural inequalities impacting Muslim communities here in the UK. We're joined by two brilliant guests in today's episode of our podcast. Firstly, Professor Tahir Abbas, who is Professor of Radicalization Studies at Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs in The Hague. He graduated with a PhD in Ethnic Relations from the University of Warwick in 2001. His current research interests include Islamophobia and radicalization, gender and violence, and polarization and extremism. He is the author, editor, and co-editor of 20 books, as well as the author, editor, and co-editor of over 100 peer-reviewed articles and chapters. Secondly, we're joined by our very own Samiha Rafik. Samiha is a graduate in both Islamic Studies and Psychological Sciences and works as a researcher at the Community Policy Forum, putting her interests in politics, policy, and community organization to good use. Professor Abbas and Samiha, thank you so much for taking time out to join us today.

Professor Abbas: Thank you for having me.

Samiha: Thank you for having me.

Host: So, let's launch straight into today's discussion. First, I wanted to come to you, Professor Abbas, and ask: What are the far-right strategies in framing Muslim communities as societal threats? Particularly, we've seen the grooming gang narrative resurface in recent weeks. With a focus on that, how would you say the far-right narrative around Muslim communities in the UK has evolved in recent years?

Professor Abbas: Essentially, what the far-right does—and this is a big spectrum in terms of extreme right and radical right—is they cherry-pick. They cherry-pick various high-profile cases that have related to South Asian Muslim men and place all the energy, all the focus, on those groups. And then what they do also is to present it as a group-based issue, taking it away from individual dynamics, which are important in trying to get a deeper understanding. So, this is part of their strategy: selectively cherry-picking and then projecting it, magnifying it through the instruments that they are able to mobilize, which in this case is the use of social media in particular, and social media influencers, including various political actors who sort of jump on the bandwagon for opportunistic reasons. So, it's cherry-picking, it's magnifying and disproportionately emphasizing, and then playing on existing stereotypes and narratives of othering relating to Muslims, which are, sadly, well-established right now.

Host: Thank you, Professor Abbas. Your answer leans perfectly well onto my first question for Samiha, which is around social media. Samiha, I wanted to ask you: In your opinion, how has the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media influenced public perceptions and policy discussions about the issue of CSE and grooming gangs? (CSE being child sexual exploitation.)

Samiha: I think misinformation on social media really has a huge impact on how people view child sexual exploitation, especially when it comes to who is responsible. As we mentioned, there's a focus on grooming gangs, and social media posts and far-right groups push this idea that it's primarily committed by Muslim men. What you find on social media is usually enforced by misinformation that's spread or it's in the public domain. For example, there was a Quilliam Foundation report that claimed 84% of CSE offenders were Asian men, and this was later debunked, but it's already taken root in public discourse. That kind of information is then fed into social media, and so public discourse and public opinion zero in on specific communities, creating that sense of "other." It doesn't matter that, for example, the Home Office has itself stated in a 2020 report that most CSE offenders are white men, but you wouldn't know that from headlines or online conversations. This has immense real-world consequences. For example, the Prevent strategy often targets Muslim communities under the guise of safeguarding, and that means Muslim communities feel really scrutinized. Social media really just amplifies this fear, this mistrust. It's almost like a moral panic around such issues. And because of that disinformation, no matter how much you counter it, it doesn't do a lot because it's already taken root.

Host: Thank you, Samiha. I think you mentioned some really powerful points there, particularly the data around CSE and the way in which we can use that data as members of think tanks, as academics, to debunk this far-right sensationalist narrative around grooming gangs. I wanted to stay with you, Samiha, and stay with the issue of social media, and ask: What role do algorithms play in echo chambers and the spread of far-right ideologies, particularly with the role that Elon Musk has played in amplifying this narrative in the last month? Maybe we'll come on to him a little bit more in a second, but since he has acquired ownership of Twitter (now X), what role do you think algorithms play in perpetuating misinformation and disinformation in online spaces?

Samiha: I think algorithms are really about forming echo chambers. Platforms like YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook are designed to keep you engaged, so they want to show you the most sensationalized content or the content that an individual interacts with on a regular basis. For example, if you watch a video about immigration concerns, you are going to see more of that. You're going to keep seeing more videos about it, and eventually, it will take you to far-right content. I think that's kind of where the phrase "falling down a rabbit hole" comes from. Far-right groups are really great at understanding how algorithms work, and so they utilize it to exploit these systems. It gives you content that's emotionally charged—fear, anger, outrage—because those feelings make people click, share, and comment. The other way that algorithms really reinforce or create these echo chambers is that they are also designed to block out certain voices. They're designed to block out certain stances. For example, during the time period of the war in Gaza, there were suggestions that algorithms are

Islamophobic because they reinforce ideas about Palestinian activism being equated with crime, enhancing far-right voices surrounding the protests but effectively blocking out counter-narratives. That is also something that's really key here when you're trying to understand CSE and grooming gangs. The far-right also blocks out counter-narratives, so people have to work harder to create counter-echo chambers, if that makes sense, or to de-influence. That's really what's happening right now as well with Musk. You see a flurry of content—what happened at the inauguration is being picked up and it's everywhere. You see it once, and it keeps coming back. It's an inevitability.

Host: Thank you so much, Samiha. Professor Abbas, I wanted to come back to you. We've discussed a little bit about social media, but I wanted to ask you about mainstream media. What role do mainstream media outlets play in pushing this narrative around grooming gangs and invalidating far-right narratives around Muslims? Do you feel these kinds of narratives detract from the experiences of victims of CSE, and do these kinds of narratives actually do more harm than good for these victims?

Professor Abbas: Mainstream media is also sadly part of the problem. We talk about social media, but mainstream media, in terms of the main news channels and broadcast channels, there's quite a lot of groupthink around how journalists talk about these issues and project them. Obviously, TV channels are mindful of audiences and income revenue, competing for sensationalism in a market where there's a flood of choice in terms of news sources. Sensationalism sells, and it's always been the case with media. News has always been packaged—it's not actual truth in any objective sense. There may be elements of truth in terms of facts that are necessary for any reports to be valid, but a lot of it is packaged. I often describe in my lectures that the media is like baked beans—it comes in 57 varieties, but it's still baked beans. And then I think this is the problem. With 24/7 news, there's so much choice, so you have to compete with ever greater sensationalism to keep audiences primed, often in a state of anxiety, waiting for the next news splash or breaking news. So, yes, mainstream media—there's a groupthink among journalists, there's tight editorial control. Recently, there's been quite a lot of criticism leveled at the BBC around its coverage in relation to the recent conflict in the Middle East, which has highlighted that to a lot of people who perhaps may not have been aware of some of the drift that's been going on, certainly in the BBC. Alternative voices, even in mainstream television news, tend to get drowned out because they can't compete financially, but also they're easily dismissed. The payoff is this heightened awareness, which is sensationalized, keeps people primed in between breaks. It's a groupthink among journalists who come from a very narrow substratum of society, which self-reinforces this particular groupthink. This drift is problematic because we see it in terms of wider political issues across Western Europe. If we look at all the spaces across Western Europe, we see more and more of a drift to the radical right, extreme right, far-right. Media and politics are like this unholy alliance, and it's taken off in even more extreme terms over the last 20-30 years. There used to be much more critical, independent mainstream media, but it's all been drowned out by global corporate media ownership, and that's a major problem. People do go to podcasters, YouTubers, and influencers for their alternative sources, and some of that is also extreme and warped. It's difficult to really find objective, clinically put-together news items in the way that we might have perhaps had in the past. So, there's been a

gradual drift, and it's a worrying space for sure. What it does in reality is it takes away attention from more objective understandings of some of the problems. When we think about issues of CSE, we're looking at real issues of inequality, structural disadvantage. These young girls from very underprivileged, working-class, broken-home backgrounds who have needed support and resources have been neglected all the way up to the point at which they enter into these unfortunate spaces, not always by choice, of course. The point is that saying it's a "lifestyle choice" among police officers is also a problem because that reflects poor policing. There's been a lot of learning there. A lot of the independent inquiries found that institutions have been wanting here, so lots of reform is required, but it's all on the back of systematic resources that haven't really been provided. So much needs to be done at the structural level in order to bring about change at the cultural level around how we talk about these things, how we engage with them at the everyday level.

Host: I really found the point you mentioned at the end very interesting, and that's something I wanted to come to a little bit more towards the end of the episode, where we discuss solutions to these challenges and really how we can find a constructive way forward in terms of discussing and combating this issue of child sexual exploitation here in the UK. I wanted to stay with you, Professor Abbas, and I think you did touch on this in your previous answer, and that's around the role of politicians and political discourse. How do you feel that political discourse has contributed to reinforcing the grooming gang narrative? This last month, you've seen the likes of Kemi Badenoch, Robert Jenrick, and others chime in, including Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, but going back a number of years, Sajid Javid, Priti Patel—these have all been very vocal voices on this issue. What role do you think these figures have played?

Professor Abbas: A really problematic role. They're driving forward sensationalism in order to generate political capital among their electoral base, again competing in a space where there's a restricted opportunity for differences to shine through. So, they are tending further and further to the right, and we've seen that happen to the Tory party quite destructively—self-destructively, ultimately. But also, the Labour Party is trying to make sure it doesn't lose some aspects of its electoral base, and it's really problematic because it simplifies complex issues to align with the biases that sometimes exist among these politicians, but also knowing that these will drive certain voting outputs, outcomes, and behaviors that they're interested in. It's really short-termist thinking, it's really opportunistic, and it's really problematic. I think it's a reflection of the political classes we see across Western Europe, where it's really easy for them to pick on these kinds of existing prejudices that have been very much around and highlight them with a magnifying lens, projecting them as somehow a more systematic understanding when, in fact, it's quite the opposite. And then people sadly lap it up, and in the absence of alternative voices, they're somewhat stuck. So, the political classes in our current climate have a lot to answer for because the way they've communicated about Muslims, about this grooming gang issue in particular, has been awful.

Host: Thank you, Professor Abbas. I completely agree with your point there around the role of politicians. I wanted to come back to you, Samiha. We've discussed social media, mainstream media, and the role of political discourse. I wanted to raise a new

series on Netflix called The Walk-In. I believe you've watched the series. Could you tell us a little bit about what impact the portrayal of the kinds of issues we've discussed today can have on either raising awareness or unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes?

Samiha: I think it's really important in how it gives us an idea of what far-right radicalization and hate crimes look like, and how it's so easy for young people to become susceptible. It really highlights how they pick on lonely individuals, how they pick on people who don't have much of a support structure. It also highlights the kind of theories that the far-right like to use in order to prey on people's vulnerabilities. I think it also gives us the ability to understand the risk of extremism and how it can be that anyone could fall into it if the right person is telling you the information that you need to hear. It also portrays how dangerous social media can be because there's a lot of focus on misinformation—for example, the idea that there's treatment for cancer but it's being withheld by minority groups because they don't want other people to get well, or the idea of immigration. Moving away from The Walk-In and just looking at the broader perspective of representation and how a narrative can be portrayed, I think it's also really important to keep in mind that if not done properly, it does perpetuate stereotypes. So, issues like grooming gangs, where it's very much connected to minority communities, Muslim communities in social media and the media, when such narratives are depicted on screen—and I'm not saying The Walk-In does that—but just as a general understanding, it's really important that there's representation and that real issues that are systemic, like failures across policing, social services, and beyond, and the nuances of that, are maintained because it can get lost when it comes to things like dramatic portrayals or drama. But I think The Walk-In does give us a great insight into the mind of far-right individuals and how it works, and just the incredible danger that people put themselves in by being a part of these groups because the moment they decide to change, the moment they decide they want out, there isn't a way out.

Host: That is really interesting, and definitely a series that we'd recommend everyone listening to go and watch. So, coming back to you, Professor Abbas, when it comes to narratives that are pushed by the far-right, such as narratives around Asian grooming gangs, what role can that play in the process of radicalization of individuals? Also, when we look at wider society generally, such as the far-right riots of last summer, in what ways can this process actually exacerbate racism and Islamophobia and foster a climate of hostility and hatred towards minority communities such as Muslims?

Professor Abbas: The narrative is warped to start off with, and then with the content that's added by social media influencers, political actors, and also billionaires in the context of Southport and more recently, it exacerbates the problem. What does it play on? It plays on people's fears and insecurities that they hold and are therefore unable to find solutions for through the political process. There's a real deep problem of a lack of political trust and a lack of social trust that comes on the back of the political trust that's been growing over the last 25 years. The data supports this from across the European space—people are disengaged or not participating in the way they used to, and they don't really believe that their politicians can provide for them. This is a breakdown in democracy. We talk about trying to keep democracy together, but it's fragile, and we're now talking about fascism, populism, and authoritarianism in very real

terms. It's not just an intellectual exercise anymore. We're just looking at the events of the inauguration a few days ago—what cannot be unseen in terms of certain gestures that were given by people like Elon Musk, which many describe as a Nazi salute. This is all compounded. The individual in their locations, their localities, feels that their future has been compromised because of a lack of economic opportunities, the lack of privileges that they used to get, certainly as men, disappearing as a result of globalization and internationalization. That was all done for really healthy and important reasons, but it means that these politicians can come in and take their frustrations and misdirect it, misalign it, and present it all as problems of immigration, Islam, and criminality. This is populism and authoritarianism, and again, it's becoming a real problem across the global North. We have to be very sensitive to it in order to just step back and reflect because it's so overwhelming sometimes. But it plays fundamentally on vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are not to extremism per se, but the vulnerabilities in the minds of individuals who feel stuck and abandoned, and then, as mentioned earlier, fall into these rabbit holes of groupthink. It then creates polarization and division, which can be further exploited by these very same populist instruments in politics, media, and billionaire social media power.

Host: Thank you, Professor Abbas. Coming back to you, Samiha, and I will come back to you, Professor Abbas, in due course. Samiha, how can allies and Muslim communities, in particular, work together to challenge these sorts of harmful narratives and create spaces for nuanced discussions?

Samiha: I think there's a lot of potential, and I think the first place to start is ensuring that Muslim voices are heard. So, when there are stories about grooming gangs or extremism dominating the news, Muslim community leaders, academics, and activists have the potential to provide context that's often missing, but they don't get the opportunity. So, I think that's really the first place to start—that we create a structure, we create platforms that we can promote Muslim voices regarding these issues, and allies can help amplify them. I think it's really important that we hold media accountable. So, as communities, if we are partnering with allied organizations, it's important for us to support campaigns. Another way is through grassroots initiatives. For example, Hope Not Hate has these community dialogue groups—they're a great example. I think it's about pushing those amongst our own communities. So, just within our localities, and obviously, nothing changes until policies change. The end goal is systemic change, so Muslim communities, Muslim organizations, and allies, it's really about making sure that we're pushing for stronger regulations on hate speech and misinformation. I've forever spoken about how we need to push for social media companies to have better regulation, but I've never actually seen it. I think I'm going to keep saying this as a recommendation, and I don't know when we will see it, but it's something that we need to be doing. For example, the Online Safety Bill has been scrapped, so that really needs to come back in. I think there's potential for some kind of accountability, and I think allies could really challenge things on our behalf. Issues like Prevent—and I think education is a real long-term solution. Working with Muslim organizations, working with communities, and other stakeholders, key stakeholders in this field, will really make way for resources for schools, workplaces, community groups, youth groups, to address these issues. Not only will this combat harmful narratives, but it also creates spaces for deeper

understanding. So, I think those are some of the ways that we could really work together in order to combat these harmful narratives that are perpetuated by media, social media, and sometimes by government.

Host: Thank you, Samiha. That was such a brilliant answer with a lot of layers to what you discussed there—a lot of very valuable recommendations when it comes to policy and bringing about genuine societal or cultural change among communities here in the UK, in particular. So, Professor Abbas, how can we work together and unite in order to challenge the narratives around this issue, to challenge the far-right, and particularly as an academic yourself, what can those within the academic space, within university spaces, within think tanks, and civil society do in order to bring about positive change?

Professor Abbas: Thank you for that. I think everything that has just been said is really valuable, important, and necessary. I think this reflects on local activism and engagement, and I think it's a basis to really reflect on what it is to be a Muslim. We have both an ethical and moral, as well as an intellectual, responsibility to do the right thing, and that's working with other Muslims but crucially also working with those who are not Muslims. There are plenty of anti-racist, secular, Jewish groups, individual communities, Christians—there's an interfaith space here which is really valuable. This is also about information awareness sharing, bringing people together around a common human cause, which here is about debunking myths that are creating division and polarization for all of us. This is a whole society dynamic. Muslims are minorities in the British context, and there's a set of roles and opportunities that fit around being a minority that can be taken forward. I would encourage that, and I would also encourage building self-confidence around this, which is really hard because Muslims have been battered for decades now in terms of systematic issues around Islamophobia and its particular variations. It's really challenging, but we have to remain confident despite all of these obstacles. In terms of what can happen in think tanks, universities, and the political space, again, there are good politicians amongst those who are less effective. There are think tanks that don't just spew the more extreme ideas—there are some progressive think tanks, and we should engage and work with them. In the university space, I know in my lectures and classes, we approach all the difficult subjects, and it's difficult when sometimes there is an edge of conservatism in institutions, and you have to work through the cracks without getting yourself in trouble. I say this in all honesty because a lot of academics feel that they're challenged by what they seemingly represent. For some, to talk about racism and discrimination is seen as an existential crisis, and that's just the nature, certainly in some parts of Europe, although in the UK, it's much more fluid, and there's much more depth. So, we all have our roles, we all have our responsibilities wherever we are in the spectrums of society, and we must do the best we can. Importantly, reaching out to those who are outside of our immediate faith identities because they too are likely to possess similar kinds of concerns, fears, and hopes. Together, we can build solutions, and that's the only way forward.

Host: Thank you, Professor Abbas. I think that's a very appropriate way to end this discussion when it comes to looking forward in terms of creating these spaces for counter-narratives, for unity, for allyship among those of us from various faith backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and professional backgrounds as well. I'd

particularly like to thank you for taking time out of your schedule to join us for today's discussion. I do know that you wrote a brilliant article recently for the LSE on this issue, so I would really encourage everyone listening to go and check that out and to also follow Professor Abbas on social media because you do share some very interesting views and important content on these sorts of issues. Please do also follow Community Policy Forum on Twitter (or should I say X), Instagram, LinkedIn, and on YouTube, where you'll be listening to this podcast episode. Do share our podcast far and wide, and do stay tuned for future episodes. Thank you so much.

Professor Abbas: Thank you.

Samiha: Thank you.

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