



Racially Minoritised Women's experiences of technology-facilitated sexual violence and reporting to the police



Key points

- Racially Minoritised Women's experiences of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) are varied and complex. At times these occur as part of a broader pattern of abuse, though generally are compounded by multiple forms of oppression, such as systemic racism and sexism.
- Racially Minoritised Women had both positive and negative experiences reporting to the police. However, several participants stated that the police urgently require more cultural awareness when receiving reports from Racially Minoritised Women.
- There are multiple barriers preventing Racially Minoritised Women from accessing justice, including legislation which is restrictive in its wording. Consequently, a hierarchy is forming between those who can and cannot seek justice and redress.

Summary

This research sought to unpack Racially Minoritised Women's experiences of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) and reporting to the police.

As anticipated, these are complicated and multi-faceted experiences, many of which are not adequately captured by existing terminology. Each woman described abuse linked to overlapping forms of oppression, but each had a unique experience. Some talked about being fetishised, the use of shame as a weapon, and damaging stereotypes.

The online environment and social media platforms played a role in the facilitation of TFSV, creating a space for both racism and sexism.

There were positive and negative encounters with the police. Whilst it is encouraging that some women were able to seek help through the police, issues raised reflect broader concerns around police and criminal justice responses to violence against women and girls.

Background

While research on technology-facilitated abuse has advanced, we still lack detailed understanding of the experiences of Racially Minoritised Women, including what happens after they report abuse to the police.

TFSV can be described as actions whereby technology has been used to enable – entirely or in part – the perpetration of **harmful sexual behaviour**. This encompasses offences such as online harassment, cyberstalking, and image-based sexual abuse, amongst many others. Women's experiences of these offences are strongly shaped by gender, affecting what happens and the harm done. For example, much of the language used in online harassment is steeped in sexism and misogyny. Yet it is not solely gender that influences experiences of abuse, there are multiple dimensions to our identities.

Black feminists have articulated the **interlocking and intersecting systems of oppression** in which Racially Minoritised Women live, particularly how this shapes their experience of violence. Detailing how this manifests in TFSV, the organisation Glitch, **noted the dehumanising and racist language present in online posts about Black women**, including fetishised harmful stereotypes. Indeed, this work highlights how Racially Minoritised Women's experiences of abuse

cannot be isolated to racism or sexism.

Recently there has been considerable criticism of police responses to violence against women. **The Casey Review** described the Metropolitan police as institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic, and support services stated that rape and sexual abuse had effectively been **decriminalised**. For those from racialised communities, feelings of being over-policed and under-protected are common. Research carried out by **Sistah Space** highlighted institutional distrust of the police amongst African and Caribbean heritage women. The combination of these failures creates a space in which neither justice nor protection are being delivered for racialised women.

These themes intersect to create complex, dangerous, and difficult circumstances for Racially Minoritised Women, and there is a desperate need to **understand their experiences in more depth**.

What we did

This research sought the perspectives of both victim-survivors and practitioners.

Five in-depth interviews were carried out with victim-survivors, covering their hobbies, interests, experiences and what they would like the research to achieve. Six interviews were conducted with practitioners who spoke about their knowledge of responding to TFSV and what more could be done to support Racially Minoritised Women. An analysis of five vignette case studies and a small survey of 12 responses, were also undertaken. The latter data sets provided a broader focus on experiences, what justice looks like and barriers to reporting.

As part of the project, follow-up conversations were offered to victim-survivors and practitioners to discuss emerging themes. This was to ensure participants were comfortable with the way their words and experiences were framed in the research.

Key findings

Racially Minoritised Women's experiences are highly complex and compounded by systems of oppression. Victim-survivors spoke of social media platforms facilitating fetishisation, how perpetrators of TFSV weaponised shame to further harm, and how racist stereotypes were present in the abuse they experienced. Broadly, many of these harms are exacerbated by structural and societal inequalities.

There are significant barriers in place when trying to access justice after experiencing TFSV. This is very clearly evidenced by UK intimate image abuse legislation often excluding the experiences of Racially Minoritised Women. Consequently, to pursue a criminal justice response, victim-survivors are limited to harassment offences. Yet, these are neither responded to with the same urgency, or reflective of the harms experienced.

Some victim-survivors spoke of positive experiences reporting to the police, and that whilst (in those circumstances) there was no criminal charge, the officers involved treated the victim-survivors with respect and care. However, this was not the case for everyone. Another participant involved described how the police were dismissive of the technology-facilitated aspects of her abuse, even though they caused her significant distress. There were also several concerns raised regarding the lack of cultural awareness amongst police, particularly the

significant harms of TFSV where victim-survivors are within families who hold strong traditions.

The online environment acts as a mechanism for racist and sexist abuse. Many victim-survivors experienced TFSV as part of a broader pattern of abuse, others described how it enabled people to spout abusive language. When discussing image-based sexual abuse, practitioners were deeply concerned about the racist language used by perpetrators and those commenting on non-consensually shared intimate material online. They also noted a 'collector culture,' where smaller websites host non-consensual racially categorised images.

Practitioners spoke of the reluctance of online platforms to remove harmful content that does not explicitly feature nudity or sexual acts, even in the circumstances where harm was caused. These Western measurements of safety and what is harmful, embedded in platform policies, discount the experiences of many Racially Minoritised Women, and demonstrate how structures can further enable abuse.

Next steps

Understanding intersectional experiences in more depth

Whilst this research provides insight into intersectional experiences and TFSV, there is a desperate need to unpack these experiences further. As mentioned previously, Racially Minoritised Women are not a monolith, there are differing experiences across communities, between communities, in partnership with intersecting identities, such as gender, age, disability, migrant status, and more. Additionally, technology is understood and used differently in different contexts. All these factors mean that Racially Minoritised Women's experiences are highly complex, and as stands, not fully represented in definitions of abuse, or mainstream understandings. Something which this research, and future projects, intend to address.

Addressing barriers preventing access to justice and redress

It is undeniable that there are a multitude of barriers in place preventing Racially Minoritised Women from accessing justice and redress. Legal barriers have been referenced previously in this report, however a lack of nuanced understanding from the police and online platforms regarding the complexity of abuse, also contributes to an ever-expanding list of obstacles. Indeed, these cannot be considered in isolation from each other, nor can wider barriers which

Racially Minoritised Women face day to day, such as no recourse to public funds. It is integral that the criminal justice system and government acknowledge the limitations and act with urgency to deliver a system that works for all.

Holding online platforms accountable for enabling abuse

Much of this abuse exists because it is not adequately responded to by online platforms. Racially Minoritised Women at times find that their experiences are not considered harmful by these platform's policies, which actively enables perpetrators to continue their abuse. There is a desperate need for platforms – as well as the police – to have a nuanced understanding of what can be harmful depending on the circumstances. Currently drawing lines in the sand from a particularly Western viewpoint is leaving many women vulnerable.

For further information

Scan the QR code to read more about the project.

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Dr Alishya Dhir conducted this Translational Fellowship project while working for the Police Foundation.

This work has only been possible because of the victim-survivors and support services involved. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who has contributed. I hope the research can be used to better the experiences of Racially Minoritised Women and their access to justice.

