



# Invisible Victims

A Success in Social Work Series Webinar

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**Where are  
the Black  
girls?**



**Jahnine Davis**

# Why this area of study?

## The invisibility of Black girls

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### Continued gap in knowledge

There is a paucity of research on abuse of Black children. The literature does not reflect their experience



### Focus on Gang Associated Sexual Violence & Exploitation

Little exploration on extra-familial abuse in other contexts and within the home



### Researcher spaces

Academic institutions and research centres tend to be mono-cultural and lack diversity, specifically Black academic

### Representation (or lack of it)

Samples do not reflect the general population and are often missing Black children. When included 'ethnic lumping' tends to occur (Fontes, 1995) : BAME



## Study Design

- Participant overview: Black female participants who had practice or research knowledge of Black girls and child sexual abuse from research, practice or activism
- 8 Black Woman took part in the study all of Black African- Caribbean heritage. Geographical location: two cities in the UK
- Participants were identified for the study due to limited professionals specialising in this subject
- One focus group (n=3) two telephone interviews, one face to face interview and one Skype (n=2)
- This is the first study to explore the function of racialised sexualisation and the identification of Black girls victimised by child sexual abuse

# Research Aims and Objectives

**Research Question:** Are there connections between racialised sexualisation and the under-identification of sexual abuse amongst Black girls?

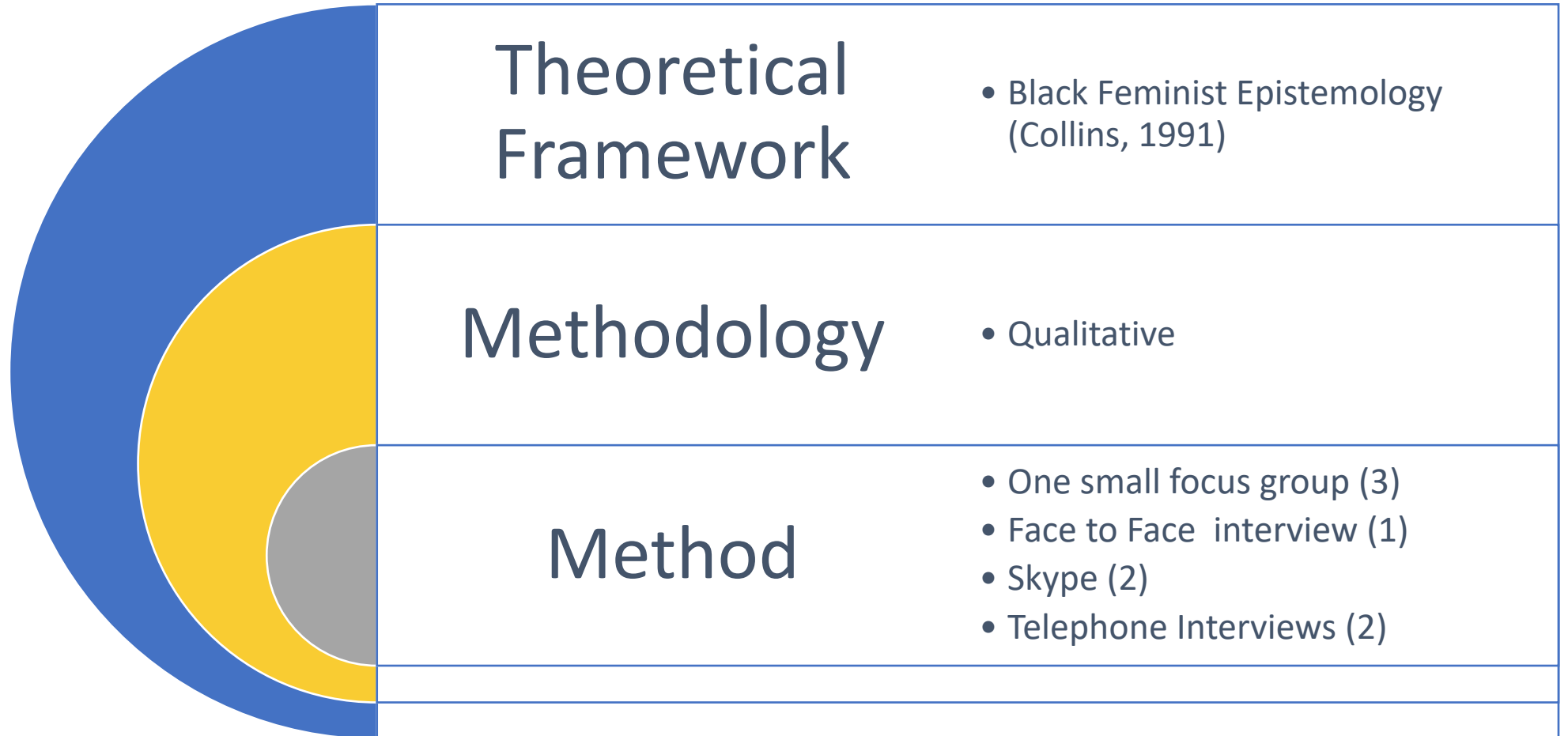
## Objectives

- 01** Literature review  
Explore existing literature relating to Black girls victimised by sexual abuse
- 02** Field work  
Gain an understanding and record the experiences of academics and practitioners who have researched or supported Black girls or adolescent victim-survivors of child sexual abuse
- 03** Recommendations  
Identify recommendations to progress research and influence practice

# Research Paradigm

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# The concept of ‘adultification’

The concept of childhood may not comply to Black children, they may be excluded from perception of the vulnerable and may experience punitive responses due their race and ethnicity (Goff, 2014; Ocen, 2015; Epstein; 2017)

## Research findings

- Adultification exists inside and outside of the home
- The research identified the necessity to broaden the focus to exploring issues within the home and community environments

*“I think they just think well Black girls are quite sexual anyway and not worth the bother” (Makeda)*

*“Black girls need to be girls, there are lot of narratives that we just want our children to cook and clean too soon” (Janet)*

# Conditioning of Black girls: appearance vs love, worth and bodily boundaries

## Research finding:

- The focus on external appearance seems to precede over the need to create spaces to discuss love, self worth and explore bodily boundaries.
- Appearance is based on body, the home, the community
- While the findings should not be generalised to the experiences of all Black girls, there was a shared understanding among participants that this was an issue which needed more attention

*“All of that stuff gets people thinking ahh well she can look after herself because she can cook and clean but has no idea of what is going on with her body and bodily boundaries’.(Amara)*

*“Can’t educate children about sex as too young know about sex but old enough to cook and be in the kitchen” (Alexia)*



# Legitimised access to Black girls

The normalised access to Black woman and girls' bodies can be traced throughout history; slavery, colonialism and science (Collins: 1991; Feinstein: 2018; Hooks, 1984)

## Research finding:

- **The assumed access to Black girls' bodies has been legitimised by colonialism which has become internalised within 'culture'**
- **Narratives of the hyper-sexual Black girl is celebrated in popular cultural**

# Participant's voices

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“The white guy is expecting you to gyrate like that all of the time, I might dance like that when listening to Bashment. I am not going to spread out my pum... Plus when you go to places like Carnival it's an expectation that a man is going to grab you and touch you – you probably don't feel comfortable with it, he hasn't asked if you wanna dance you don't know his age- he's gyrating- he's never gonna see you again. He's just seen your body and wants a go at it” (Candice)

“The intrusiveness when they hit adolescence, everyone talking about their shape and how they look, I think a lot of us accept it as we think it is a part of our culture” (Amara)

“I think it won't be seen as so significant in comparison to white girls as its just your job to be seen as sexual person, being not something, which should be reported as it's something we should just have to expect” (Makeda)

“If Black girls are not seen as girls but seen as hypersexual beings, then it just becomes an unconscious blind spot when trying to identify CSA” (Rita)

“Who is protecting us?”  
(Alexia)

# Protection : Black boys & men, the family and wider community

The priority of protecting Black boys and men has historically taken precedence with little focus on the detrimental impact it has had on protecting black women and girls

## Research findings:

- The protection of Black boys and men may not always be covert; however distrust of external services may influence decision making
- Traditionally the focus on racism has focused on Black males (Crenshaw, 1991) with little attention abuse suffered by Black women and girls

*“Whilst we know the justice system would give harsher sentences, we overvalue them (black men) but who is looking after us [pause] it is not reciprocated” (Amara)*

*“Black girls are not a priority; Black men have also come first” (Makeda)*

# A continuum of devaluation of Black women and girls

## Research Findings

- All participants identified that value was of significant meaning to Black woman and girls
- Devaluation is ongoing experience it is a continuation from Black girlhood (Garfield, 2005). Black girls are born into pre-existing and pre-determined beliefs about their value

*“No one values us, no cares about us. Why aren’t people asking questions?”  
(Alexia)*

*“We are perceived as strong why would they need to research on us, are we even worth talking about it. We research about crime, prison etc but not sexual abuse- there is not regard for us as we are not seen in and vulnerable light”  
(Candice)*

*“Black children and girls - not being or having media attention, the response is not as sensitive [pause] you know, it would be different if it was white child.”  
(Rita)*

# Limited spaces to communicate & acknowledge abuse

## Research Findings:

- There are limited spaces to share and acknowledge experiences of abuse
- The notion of the deserving and underserving victim may influence help-seeking
- Specialist service provisions do not always provide support to Black girls, even though it may look that on appearance
- A focus on presenting issue may influence service responses

# Participants' voices

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## Statutory services

“Lets talks to about social care, is it caring? Builds certain narratives, lack of understanding and curiosity which I think it deliberate and intentional this has not just been internalised, we have people who are racist- who continue to devalue and dehumanise and want to place our identities in a certain way” (Femi)

## Specialist services

“There is no Black in BAME, the services do not cater for our needs as Black women. We need a disbandment of the word BAME as it assumes all experiences when it's not the case” (Makeda)

## Inside the home

“Black girls are brought up in certain ways, limiting the freedom to express themselves in the home with minimal spaces to speak but are seen as independent, confident and able externally - however this does not translate into people's experiences” (Alexia)

# Recommendations for Practice & Research

## Practice

- Increase professional curiosity
- Review EDI impact in safeguarding responses
- Embed intersectional and systemic thinking in everyday practice
- Explore experiences through the lens of intersectionality: reflecting on how a child's race, ethnicity, gender, age intersect – challenging the concept of the universal child
- Use reflective supervision to explore issues such as gendered racism to strengthen approach and support

## Research

- Broaden lens from Gang Associated Sexual Violence & Exploitation
- Increase representation
- Reflect on the challenges of 'ethnic lumping' all children from minoritised communities

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**Thank  
You**



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# *Hidden Victims* *Findings from The Road Home* *Study*

Jade Levell

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# Why this topic?

- Gap in knowledge in this area was found from my front-line professional work in the charity sector.
- Young men who experience domestic violence and abuse at home in childhood were falling through the gaps between Children's Services and Youth Offending teams.
- They don't fit the 'ideal victim' stereotype. Highly stigmatised group, associated with racism, classism, identification as 'gang-involved' and thus potential perpetrators of violence.
- I was curious - how do men in this situation navigate their masculine identity in this context?

# Study Design

- Participant group: Male participants who self-identified as having experienced domestic violence and abuse in childhood and involved in gangs/on road.
- 8 men took part in the study. 4 black men [1 Rwandan refugee, 3 black British], 2 mixed race men [dual heritage white British/black Caribbean], 2 white British men. From three large cities in England. Self-referred to the study. Aged 21-50.
- Life story narrative interviews (Plummer, 2001) aided by Music Elicitation (Levell, 2019; Allett, 2010)
- This was the first study that has been undertaken to look specifically at the intersection of DVA and road/gang involvement.

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# The Utility of Music Elicitation as an interview tool

- Desert Island Discs style approach- bring three music tracks to the interview.
- Enhanced co-production of the interview space as it was curated by the participants.
- Enabled them to say ‘this is what happened to me’ and refer to lyrics or music video.
- Music as a recall to past memories.
- This approach could have utility in social work practice ... ?

For more information you can access my paper on this topic (free- open access) here:

Levell, J., 2019. “Those songs were the ones that made me, nobody asked me this question before”: Music Elicitation with ex-gang involved men about their experiences of childhood domestic violence and abuse. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1609406919852010>

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# Understanding Masculinities and Violence

- **Subordinate Masculinity in childhood. Powerlessness**
  - Intersecting child abuse, sexual exploitation, familial rape.
- **Emerging and increasing Protest Masculinity in adolescence**
  - School and peer violence
  - Distinction between being 'a man' and 'The Man'
  - Increasing status when gang-involved.
- **Co-existing Vulnerable Masculinity articulated through violence**
  - Enacting violence as a reaction to fear
  - Enacting violence as a form of self-harm
  - The pressure to be tough/hard
  - The pressure to be the breadwinner for mother (due to being single, or experiencing financial abuse)
  - Managing mental health issues alongside substance abuse

# Powerlessness at home (Subordinate Masculinity)

“What is was yeah, when I was young, I was obviously, you know I come from a broken home and that’s when I went onto the streets to escape... So, when I used to hear my mum scream and I couldn’t do nothing for her so I’d go onto the estate and someone and we started out as a group of friends and then to cut a long story, we went to all-out war” (Dylan)

“at a young age you don’t know how to decipher what’s going on around you, you just know that someone’s treating you in that way and you feel it, you feel the way they are treating you and that’s the way you explain it. It felt like terrorizing or bullying or control (.) erm, and then I just became very violent and violence became normal.” (Sam)

# Managing this feeling of powerlessness (Emerging Protest Masculinity)

Several participants talked about enacting violence at school from the age of eight years old.

“For me it was like I wanna be a man, **I wasn’t man enough**, because he [father] was here having fights with woman, making woman get scared of him, for me now way, for me this was a big problem so it became a thing it was like, I would go up there trying to pick a fight with men, because **it was a way to feel like a man**, a lot of my friends we would grow up, because parents would beat you to put you in your place, he’s the man of the house, he can get away with that, so now when you go outside there is no way I think, there is no way you allow anyone to disrespect you, it’s like you can’t do that because it’s been done to you at home, it’s been done to you at home, you can’t let another person” (Eric)

# The distinction between becoming 'a man' and 'The Man'

(Ordinary Masculinity vs. Protest Masculinity)

“I’ve never gone home, I’ve had to make my own home and as a result you’ve had to become a man and take care of your responsibilities and you start to build your future and that’s what it’s about”  
(Jordan)

“I became The Man eventually and everyone loved me, well, they didn’t but they feared me, I wanted respect but I didn’t... they feared me, and people showed me, like lifted me up, glorified everything that I did, erm, and I became the boss (...)” (Sam).



# Recommendations for Practice

1. I advocate for DVA organisations to develop gender-specific and masculinity-aware interventions for male child survivors
  - A consideration of the gendered language around child survivors of DVA/GBV and the impact on young men's ability to identify themselves as victims
2. I recommend closer joint work between DVA organisations and youth offending/gang outreach organisations.
3. Increased recognition of the importance of early identification of DVA occurring at home. Using violence at school as a potential indicator.
4. Increased provision of safe spaces for young men who experience DVA at home and live in gang affected areas, with a focus on accommodating vulnerable masculinities.
5. I recommend that tools are developed that use the strengths of music elicitation as a novel way to listen to children who have experienced DVA and on-road/gang-involvement.

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# Thank you

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