

Pandemic racism and sexism in Australia: responses from Asian migrant women

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Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in December 2019, studies have emerged on its effect on either racism or sexism. Studies that address the intersection of pandemic-related racism and sexism are lacking and the experiences of Asian women have been neglected.

We address these lacunae by drawing on interviews with 20 Asian women in late 2021 living in the second most populous state in Australia, Victoria. We investigated how:

- Asian women in Australia experienced racism;
- Their experiences of racism intersected with sexism; and
- How they make sense of their experiences and how they see themselves responding to future incidents.

We argue three points:

- The lack of attention to Asian women's pandemic-related experiences of racism obscures the fact that Asian women encounter racism more than their male counterparts;
- The lack of attention to how sexism intersects with Asian women's experiences of racism makes it more difficult for them to make sense of their

- experiences and potentially preventing mistreatment from continuing; and
- Participants' reflections show that there is potential for women of colour in general to form coalitions based on sharing intersectionality and this offers valuable insights for feminist and antiracist studies and initiatives.

As a visibly Asian woman who has lived in Australia for more than a decade, I have frequently felt more vulnerable than my non-Asian female friends and my Asian male counterparts. My awareness of my small frame and youthful-looking face add to these anxieties. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have, like everyone around the world, been concerned about contracting the virus. But I was also anxious about racism directed at me and others like me, on top of the sexist experiences I already encounter often. I was not surprised to find that other Asian migrant women in Australia had similar experiences, and that these experiences were intensified during the pandemic.

Asian-born Australians make up 9.9 percent of the total Australian population. Of the ten most commonly reported countries of birth for those born overseas, six are Asian countries (India, China, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Sri Lanka). Australians who were born in Asia are younger than Australians of other ancestry and Asian-born Australians are usually highly educated, many having used their qualifications to migrate to Australia as part of its selective migration policy that prioritises skilled migration.

My co-authors and I interviewed 19 self-identified Asian female migrants and one Australian-born woman of Asian heritage for the project. Participants were aged between 21 and 49 and were living in the state of Victoria at the time of the interviews. Most are highly educated, having obtained a minimum of a tertiary level Diploma. Participants originated from New Zealand, UK, China, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Japan, Cambodia and Taiwan. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

The participants had a wide range of experiences of racism and sexism in Australia,

with some reporting no experience at all to some reporting physical attacks. Eight out of 20 participants experienced racially motivated verbal or physical abuse during the pandemic and 14 out of 20 participants discussed their experiences of sexism as Asian women living in Australia before and during the pandemic.

Their experiences of racism match headlines from all over the world that showed the intensification of racism towards Asian people during the pandemic. Bonny (20s, student, Malaysia-born), for instance, told us how she and her friend were abused on the street for responding to ‘two girls that were racially harassing bystanders and telling them to go back to China.’ Her friend was assaulted by one attacker while the other threatened her by ‘holding a glass-like alcohol bottle and kind of shaking it towards [her].’

Others, like Ditya (31, Nepal-born), had other traumatic experiences during the pandemic such as being yelled at on the streets of Melbourne: ‘He [the perpetrator] just kept yelling and he said, you come from this country and that, and then ‘you’re just living in our country’. It was very bad, but I didn’t say anything I just walked out, because if I had answered him back. I think he would have done something...or molested me.’

We asked participants if they thought women were more vulnerable to racism in Australia. Ditya’s answer was aptly put: ‘Yes, I think so, because we’re always considered a weak species compared to male counterparts. That’s why, [...] normally we don’t speak up [...] Even I didn’t do anything, I just walked out or I just avoided the situation the best I can. And that’s why we are always considered weaker [...] I think [...] women are the main targets.’

Harassment and fears of violence

The study’s participants believed that women were targeted more than men by racists. This reflects the results of a 2021 survey on COVID-19 racism with more than 500 participants, which found that the largest number of respondents who

reported experiencing racism identified as female (60.1 percent), in contrast to those who identified as male (34.1 percent). What is particular about our findings, however, is that while our questions mainly focused on exploring participants' experiences of racism during the pandemic, they frequently expressed their anxieties about racism as well as sexual harassment and gender-related violence. Participants' responses remind us that while Asian people have intensified experiences of racism during the pandemic, Asian women experience racism in particular ways such as being sexualised in online and offline harassment. However, my co-authors and I frequently sensed an inability among participants to articulate their experiences in terms of racism and its intersection with sexism.

For instance, Fiona (29, born in mainland China), told us that she encountered many more instances of harassment since the pandemic began. This included a man she hardly knew who called her frequently at midnight, social media messages from people who attempted to befriend her by claiming they spoke Chinese, and strangers trying to 'pick her up' by speaking in Chinese to her at bus stops. She felt that she was targeted because '[men think it is] easy to pick up Chinese [girls] because they know that it's likely that the Chinese girls [feel it would be rude to] say no'. These experiences made Fiona feel, in her own words, like 'items': a 'thing' rather than a person, objectified and othered on a daily basis, causing her to fear men in general. Fiona, however, like other participants was unsure how best to respond to perpetrators; and participants frequently used the term 'weird' to describe their experiences and the perpetrators, rather than racist and/or sexist.

Similarly, Jane (26, born in mainland China) has become worried about being attacked by men due to several online and offline incidents since the pandemic began, including being shouted at by a stranger in public. She shared her intensified experiences of online harassment: '[t]here's also been experiences online that make me feel strange and I don't know how to respond to them. So since the pandemic started, there have been times that like different people [...] try to add me as friends on the social media platforms and also all of them, like most of them are men. And some people [...] verbally harass me like, 'Hey, beautiful'. That sort of creepy

message. Or send you some porn pictures on the social media platforms.'

The insecurity felt by Fiona and Jane during the pandemic intensified due to an increase in harassment. Their experiences suggest that Asian women could be more vulnerable, or feel more vulnerable, to racism and sexism. Jane and Fiona struggled to make sense of their experiences of harassment. Their experiences are tightly linked to their positionality as Asian women: their appearances are stereotyped by others such that they seem like easy targets, whether sexually and/or racially. As Jane aptly put, 'if I don't look like this, if I'm from a different background, probably I don't have to take all these [abuses].'

Asian women are usually physically small and often look younger than they are

Unlike other studies, such as one which found that Aboriginal interviewees in Australia generally agreed that it was good to confront a racist perpetrator, most of our participants expressed otherwise.

As Asian women, most participants felt they were vulnerable to perpetrators, whether due to their small size or looking youthful. Lorrie (30, born in mainland China) emphasised the large size of her White female perpetrator relative to her and said she would not respond as 'I am afraid of getting physically hurt'. Diane (40s, Singapore-born), told us she also felt Asians look more vulnerable: 'I'm not tall. I'm at 1.5 [metres]. I'm not even above 1.6, like more [relative to] the local context'. Diane also said that if a racist incident happened to her, she 'will run because I'm so small,' instead of confronting the perpetrator. Fiona told us how her youthful looking appearance can be a bane. She noted: 'it is harder to stand up as a Chinese female' who looks 'young' and 'it's hard [to] be really projecting that kind of a strong image to fight back.' Instead, she discussed how she needs to be 'subtle' and 'leverage the resources available rather than [fight] just by yourself because [I] absolutely feel unsafe to fight by myself.'

Stereotypes of Asian women as weak and submissive as well as cultural preferences to avoid confrontation also made participants feel more vulnerable. Sunny (20s, Singapore-born), for instance, experienced a racist assault on the streets of Melbourne. She responded below to the question of whether she felt more vulnerable to racism than other groups of women by saying that stereotypes of Asian women being weak and submissive cause many to think they are 'easier to attack'. At the same time, Sunny acknowledged that culturally, she was also taught to 'avoid confrontation':

'I think people of colour are all vulnerable to racism in their own ways, but I think the situation currently has a lot of ire directed towards the Chinese, and therefore Asians due to the virus and the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). A lot of people generalise Asians as being Chinese first [...] I think the stereotype of being weak and submissive has long existed even within Asian culture itself, where many think that Asian women given our sizes are smaller and easier to attack. We're often presented even in Asian media, and even storybooks, to be weak women who can't fight for themselves, both mentally and physically [...] I've been brought up to not attack [criticise] others and avoid confrontation when necessary. This isn't the case with the attacker. So in their eyes, we're currently a lot more vulnerable and easier as a people of colour to attack.'

Sunny's response pointed to how people of colour are all vulnerable to racism and it was just this 'moment' of the pandemic meant that racism was directed mostly towards the Chinese and Asians. Like Sunny, other participants also reflected that they are just as vulnerable to racism as other minority women. For instance, Diane suggested that 'I do feel vulnerable to racism as an Asian person but I do not think I feel "more" vulnerable than others [such as Aboriginal women]'. Tanya also states: 'In terms of vulnerability with racism, in comparison to the Aboriginal communities, I would say depends. We experience racism from different perspectives [in different ways].' Their responses all suggest solidarity among minority women is possible.

While most participants did not confront their perpetrators or report the incident to

the police, some said they would do so in future. Ditya, for instance, felt she should have spoken up to the men who yelled at her and asked her friend to call the police. Others, like Bonny, reported her attack to police but found that the police were racist too when they made racist remarks about her attacker who appeared to have Aboriginal ancestry. Bonny reflected on Australia's greater demographic context when she said that her attacker 'was probably a product of the environment that white Australia has done as well. So we were both victims, [she was] just lower in the food chain, victim wise'. Participants also discussed their strategies to avoid potential racists. Tanya, for instance, said she was cautious of men especially on public transport due to experiencing a racist incident at the start of the pandemic. Audrey also developed strategies such as timing her shopping to decrease her chances of bumping into 'young Caucasians' and preferring to order food online rather than in person.

However, other than report future incidents, participants focused on their avoidance strategies rather than things they could proactively *do* to tackle racism and sexism. We argue that this lack of action is linked to the inability to understand and identify their experiences as intersecting racism and sexism.

Voicing the intersection between racism and sexism

Racism frequently intersects with sexism. The intersectionality of racism with sexism has been mostly discussed in studies on sexual racism, defined as 'the discrimination between potential sexual or romantic partners on the basis of perceived racial identity'. Less has been said, however, about racial fetish: one's preference for sexual intimacy with people of a specific racial group. A prime example is where Asian women (and in some cases men) are preferred, mostly by White people, due to highly sexualised stereotypes of being seductive or submissive. Some have also noted that men with fetishes for Asian women may be driven by an anti-feminist backlash, longing to return to traditional gender roles supposedly embodied by the

idea of a submissive Asian woman.

We argue that the stereotypes of Asian women as weak and submissive underlie their supposed attractiveness while positioning them as easy targets for hostility. As Associate Professor Fran Martin highlighted in her study of Chinese female transmigrants in Australia, her study's participants' fears of assault were connected to the 'sense that East Asian-looking young women could become sexual targets for non-Asian men with stereotyped preconceptions of their desirability as partners.' These participants also felt they were more vulnerable to attack due to 'supposedly being smaller, weaker, and more defenseless than either white women or Chinese men'.

Asian women frequently struggled with their experiences of racism and sexism while exerting significant emotional labour to understand and negotiate their experiences. They experience hermeneutical injustice: 'wherein someone has a significant area of their social experience obscured from understanding owing to prejudicial flaws in shared resources for social interpretation' —a marginalisation that is driven by a White-centered experience that neglects racial dynamics from other perspectives. The inability to make sense of one's ongoing mistreatment prevents one from protesting it and finding effective measures to stop it.

As discussed earlier, the hermeneutical injustice Fiona and Jane endured was profound. In articulating their experiences, they could only use terms like 'weird' or 'strange' and did not know how to respond to perpetrators. Fiona told us she would even pretend to be Japanese at times to avoid further harassment. The inability to see the link between racism and sexism towards Asian women reduced her response to one that pretended to be another kind of Asian woman. While denying her own nationality might have helped at that moment to avoid potential or further harassment, Fiona's 'strategy' does not address the core issue: the intersection of racism and sexism targeting Asian women in general. The fact that Fiona thought being Japanese, instead of Chinese, might have prevented uncomfortable conversations and potential racism, is a notable revelation in itself, but it also poses

a prejudicial flaw in understanding harassment.

While the fear of White men was a dominant theme during the interviews, participants also show awareness of racists and sexists from other demographics, although such experiences may be sidelined. The dominant White-other binary, we suggest, is also a prejudicial flaw that causes hermeneutical injustice. As researchers have established, the perpetrators of racism can be of any race and may even be co-ethnics. While the Chinese/Asian victim versus White perpetrator framing has some element of truth, understanding racism and sexism based on this framing alone obscures greater insights into racism and sexism, and can contribute to hermeneutical injustice. Indeed, this misunderstanding was present in some of our participants' experiences. The racial assault on Bonny and her friend, for instance, made headlines and was initially framed by media coverage as a case of White perpetrators versus Chinese international students. In truth, neither Bonny nor her friend originated from China, and Bonny did not have any Chinese ancestry. The attacker was an Aboriginal woman.

Gaps in studies and campaigns

Activist campaigns during the pandemic share similarities with studies on pandemic racism in the lack of attention to intersectionality. Campaigns in Australia and abroad during the pandemic have focused mainly on racism against culturally and linguistically diverse people (CALD) or violence against women. Little attention has been paid to how a specific group of women experience the pandemic.

Studies have suggested that much intersectionality research has moved away from activism and group-based approaches centering on women of colour. Antiracist activism during the pandemic has obscured gendered identities. Campaigns highlighting violence against women during the pandemic has similarly obscured racial identities. Yet, conversations about identities and their intersectionality have potential to form coalitions. In thinking about anti-racism, recognising the

intersectional experiences of Asian women does not mean we cannot organise as culturally and linguistically diverse groups and/or 'Asian' communities. Rather, intersectionality can be the foundation for CALD women to unite. The COVID-19 pandemic may have intensified racism, but it also presents opportunities to rethink race, gender and future coalitions founded on intersectionality.

Bonny, for instance, reflected on racism in Australia and suggested that her Aboriginal attacker was also a victim, and that her attacker may have experienced racism herself. Indeed, other minority women such as Aboriginal women also suffer the intersection of racialisation and sexualisation in the context of White assumptions of Aboriginal sexuality as 'primitive' and less sexually repressed. The stereotype of Asian women as weak or submissive is tightly linked to what participants felt were their specific 'disadvantages': small stature, youthful appearances, and non-confrontational cultures. Participants such as Sunny acknowledged, however, that people of colour are all vulnerable to racism and it was only the current 'moment' that Chinese and Asians are being particularly targeted.

Returning to concerns voiced by intersectional scholars that much intersectionality research has moved away from activism and group-based approaches centering women of colour, we argue that the focus on intersectional experiences of Asian women must grow to enable victims to have shared resources for social interpretation. Only when their social experiences are not obscured by White-centered experiences can they identify, protest and stop mistreatment. The ability to identify their intersectional experiences will also foster greater potential for solidarity with other women of colour in a post-COVID future.

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Image: Queen Victoria market, Melbourne. Credit: a.canvas.of.light/Flickr.