

Women's Groups at the Leveson Inquiry

LEVESON MUST TACKLE MEDIA BIAS AGAINST WOMEN

Call for penalties for prejudicial and inaccurate reporting

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: TUESDAY 24 JANUARY 2012

Four leading women's organisations gave oral evidence at the Leveson Inquiry today (24 January) and said that Lord Leveson should make strong recommendations on the way the media reports on and portrays women.

Representatives of Eaves, the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Equality Now and Object (who made a joint submission to the Inquiry with the Turn Your Back on Page 3 Campaign) (1), referred to many examples of newspaper reports which are inaccurate, prejudicial and misleading regarding women's experiences of violence, and which portray women in a sexualised and objectified way. They argued that the cumulative effect is harmful to women's equality.

The spokespeople then called on the Inquiry to include in its recommendations:

- That the PCC is replaced by a stronger body which will hear complaints from groups as well as individuals; which has powers to investigate on its own authority as well as acting on complaints; which is independent of the press and has representatives of equality groups on it; of which membership is compulsory; and which can impose strong sanctions when complaints are upheld, including perhaps fines.
- This new body should carry out ongoing monitoring of patterns of discrimination.
- Journalists should receive training on the myths and realities about violence against women and how to treat victims.
- That a new code of practice is developed for the way 'case studies' are dealt with by the media.
- Regulation of printed materials should be consistent with other forms of media regulation so that if sexually objectifying material would not pass pre-watershed restrictions on the television it should not be printed in unrestricted newspapers.
- Schools should be required to tackle gender inequality and gender stereotypes and deliver media literacy classes.

The four women's organisations were called to give oral evidence after making written submissions to the Inquiry in December (2). These submissions highlighted the failure to report accurately on crimes of violence against women; news reporting on such stories which upholds myths about sexual violence, prostitution and crimes against ethnic minority women; news reporting which implicitly blames women for violence committed against them; the normalisation of images and stories which sexualise and objectify women in every edition of particular newspapers; the absence from much of the media of the diversity of women's lives and experiences; and the UK government's responsibility to ensure the media does not discriminate against women.

Heather Harvey of Eaves said:

“These are not matters of taste and decency. Poor reporting on all forms of violence against women, but particularly on rape and sexual violence, has an impact on individual women and indeed all those involved in the judicial process from reporting a crime to obtaining a conviction. It can deter victims from reporting crimes and give a message to perpetrators that you are likely to get away with it.

“Violence against women is not inevitable – it has a cause and it has consequences, it can be prevented or reduced – we want to see media coverage that examines it as a phenomenon for which society has responsibility and which we can do something about rather than as a series of tragic incidents. The media is capable of bringing forensic, challenging and innovative analysis and insight to bear when it wants to – it would be a benefit to us all and particularly to women if they did so in these cases”.

End Violence Against Women Coalition Chair Marai Larasi said:

“Reporting on violence against women is routinely inaccurate, prejudicial and victim-blaming – like the headline ‘orgy in the park’ used to describe a gang rape. This can retraumatise victims, and sends a message to the wider community about which crimes are and are not considered serious.

“In contrast, accurate reporting which gives context and is fair to survivors can actually be empowering and is part of the shift in wider attitudes which is desperately needed.”

Jacqui Hunt of Equality Now said:

“Good journalism strives for balance and diversity, yet women are rarely represented as leaders, experts or decision-makers, rather they are frequently objectified, stereotyped, trivialised and demeaned. The long-term corrosive effect of this type of reporting contributes to an environment of less freedom for women including to get justice against violence, to hold political office, to develop healthy body images. Eliminating gender stereotypes and promoting a more comprehensive portrayal of women would be a significant contribution the media could make to addressing these problems.”

Anna Van Heeswijk of Object said:

“If we are serious about wanting a socially responsible press, recommendations must address the persistent portrayal of women as sex objects in the UK Page 3 tabloids.

“Page 3 tabloids contribute to a culture that reduces women to sex objects. The one-dimensional and stereotyped portrayal of women as sexualised body parts is harmful and it is completely preventable. The solution is simple. Page 3 images which are already banned from the workplace and are restricted on television before the 9pm watershed should not be displayed in mainstream newspapers which are sold at child's eye level with no age-restriction. This would allow for greater consistency in media regulation, it would help keep harmful materials out of the mainstream and away from children who are shaping their identities and developing their sense of the world, and it would constitute a crucial step forward in stemming the sexual objectification of women.”

Francine Hoenderkamp of the Turn Your Back on Page 3 Campaign said:

“The acceptance and normalisation of the sexual objectification of women and girls that pervades The Sun, The Daily Star and The Sport directly contributes to our unequal status in society. It limits our choices, stalls our progress and violates our human rights.”

The four women’s organisations plan to make their concerns known directly to the government by writing and enclosing their submissions to the Leveson Inquiry soon.

The organisations concluded:

“This inquiry is about establishing the public interest in having a free press governed by some basic ethical standards. This question must include specific consideration what is in women’s interest.”

ENDS

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Notes to editors:

1. The End Violence Against Women Coalition is the UK’s largest coalition of organisations working to eradicate violence against women and girls; members include Rape Crisis England and Wales, Refuge, Women’s Aid, The Women’s Institute, Amnesty International UK and the TUC.
2. Equality Now is an international human rights organisation working to promote and protect the rights of women and girls around the world. With over 35,000 individual and organisational members in 160 countries we partner with local and grassroots groups to document discrimination and violence against women and mobilise international action to stop these abuses.
3. Object is an award-winning human rights organisation which campaigns against the sexual objectification of women in the media and popular culture.
4. Eaves is a London-based charity that provides high quality housing and support to vulnerable women. We also carry out research, advocacy and campaigning to prevent all forms of violence against women.
5. The four organisations’ separate written submissions to the Leveson Inquiry discussed the failure to report accurately on crimes of violence against women; news reporting on such stories which upholds myths about sexual violence, prostitution and crimes against ethnic minority women; news reporting which implicitly blames women for violence committed against them; the normalisation of images and stories which sexualise and objectify women in every edition of particular newspapers; and the UK government’s responsibility to ensure the media does not discriminate against women. All are available on the organisations’ websites or on request by calling the numbers above.