

Women's Groups Respond to Leveson

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: THURSDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2012

LEVESON - Tabloids demean women; new watchdog must take complaints from women's groups

Women's organisations (Eaves, End Violence Against Women Coalition, Equality Now, Object and Turn Your Back on Page 3) who gave evidence to the Leveson Inquiry in January 2012 have warmly welcomed the 'Leveson Report' today (29 November) and called for all parties to get behind Leveson's model for a new independent regulator.

The women's groups said that Lord Leveson's recommendations "open the door" for government and media regulators to tackle the "endemic sexism" the women's groups found in a recent report, 'Just the Women', on the British press.

Key issues in the report:

- Lord Leveson says there is evidence to show that the "Page 3 tabloid press often failed to show consistent respect for the dignity and equality of women generally, and that there was a tendency to sexualise and demean women", in particular the Sport;
- He agreed with the key recommendation of the women's groups that "what is clearly required is that any such [new] regulator has the power to take complaints from representative women's groups";
- Lord Leveson also said that consideration should be given to Code amendments which would give the new body power to intervene in cases of allegedly discriminatory reporting and reflect the spirit of equalities legislation.

Lord Leveson said that an article highlighted in the women's groups' evidence, 'Bodyguards for Battered Towie Sisters' (The Sun) may well have infringed clause 12 of the Editors Code as currently drafted.

Heather Harvey of Eaves said:

"We are very pleased that Leveson has acknowledged the demeaning and sexist treatment of women. The portrayal of women in the press goes to the core of public interest and directly impacts on women's access to justice, women's aspirations and society's expectations of women. We are particularly pleased with the recognition of a need for an independent mechanism and one which can accept complaints from women's groups – we look forward now to the government's response and hope it is as honest about the real state of media sexism."

Anna Van Heeswijk of Object said:

"Lord Leveson has given the green light today to setting up a new press regulatory body equipped to challenge the persistent sexism in our daily press. We hope the

government looks carefully at his report and ours, and then ensures that any new regulation enables civil society to challenge the press, and to bring about an end to upskirt photography, Page 3 sexism, and the real harms to women which result."

Holly Dustin, of End Violence Against Women, said;

"Lord Leveson has opened the door for the government and media regulators to tackle harmful, discriminatory and inaccurate media portrayal of women. This opportunity must not be lost and work to develop the new complaints body and Code must link in with work going on elsewhere in government to tackle sexualisation and violence against women and girls. We applaud Lord Leveson for addressing these issues in his thorough report."

Jacqui Hunt of Equality Now said:

"The Leveson report's acceptance that 'women are reduced to the sum of their body parts' by virtue of their demeaning and sexualising representation by the Page 3 tabloid press, beyond those who choose to appear in their pages, is underscored in our joint 'Just the Women' report. Such images clearly run contrary to the public interest and we welcome Lord Justice Leveson's proposal that amendments to the Press Code should be considered, which would embody true respect for the equality of all members of society."

Francine Hoenderkamp of Turn Your Back On Page 3 said:

"It is a victory for women that Lord Justice Leveson has recognised the harmful impact that the Page 3 tabloid press has on women's inequality - of which this overt sexist and misogynistic portrayal of women is perpetuating and fuelling. If the tabloid press insists on continuing to treat women in this way it is up to the government to ensure there is a sufficient regulatory body in place that holds them to account."

The report, entitled 'Just the Women' (1), by Eaves, Equality Now, the End Violence Against Women Coalition and Object (2), is an evaluation of eleven British national newspapers' content over a two week period in September this year. It examines how crimes of violence against women are reported, how women are portrayed more broadly, and the general visibility of women in public life. The fortnight's study found over 1,300 pieces of editorial and images which illustrated these issues.

The report's key findings are:

- Crimes of violence against women are frequently reported inaccurately and without context, with a tendency to minimise the perpetrator's actions and to blame the victim
- Some tabloids contribute to the sexualisation of girls while purporting to condemn it; sexual abuse of children is sometimes presented in a way that minimises the abuse and is even on occasion titillating
- In many newspapers women are persistently portrayed as sex objects, alongside the mainstreaming and 'normalising' of the sex industry; this is also an area where the line between advertising and editorial is extremely blurred
- Regarding women in public life, younger women are visible but heavily stereotyped and infantilised, while older, disabled and black and minority ethnic women are less visible, and those in public life are often subject to ridicule.

The report refers to examples of poor reporting over the two week period including:

“Killer Stoke Ace gets life” (Sun) focuses on the loss of a footballer’s potential career rather than his extremely violent murder of his 15 year old girlfriend

“Alex Reid won’t face criminal damage charges over his late night arrest” (Mirror) reports humorously on the cage fighter trying to break into his girlfriend’s house

“British business man accused of rape fails in anonymity bid” (Telegraph), lengthy article about the public school education and successful business history of a man accused of rape

“Soldier stabbed ex-girlfriend to death after he hacked her Facebook account and discovered she’d had an abortion” (Daily Mail)

“CAVORTING provocatively in a tiny pink swimsuit... little Ocean Orrey struts her stuff in a British beauty pageant – aged just FOUR” (Sun) whilst apparently concerned for her welfare, this report on a toddler beauty pageant portrays a young child as acting in a sexy and knowing way

“They bang ‘em in Bangor...but there’s no sex in Essex” (Sport) is a report on a student sex survey, an example of the frequent focus in some newspapers on the sexual conduct of female students; the report uses the language of pornography (“horny young learners”) and is accompanied by an image of near naked young woman in a bar. This story was run alongside a separate story about a sexual violence conviction which was minimising of the offence (‘Peeping Tom shower perv avoids prison’) and alongside explicit sex industry adverts.

“Pop babe is latest upskirt conquest of papararsey Pete” (Sport) is an example of tabloid newspapers’ frequent use of ‘upskirt photography’ whose captions and accompanying editorial present the images as exciting exactly because the subject is apparently not consenting to the photo being taken.

Reporting on the Cabinet re-shuffle during this period included editorial which was patronising, insulting and humiliating to women including Baroness Warsi and Maria Miller, including reference to women politicians’ choice of dress.

The four campaigning women’s organisations are calling on the government to examine Lord Justice Leveson’s proposals and then to consider instituting a new press regulation regime which:

- Allows third parties to make complaints; and allows for thematic investigations as well as those on individual cases
- Has clear guidance about women’s equality in the text of the new code; and has accountable representative(s) of the equality sector as member(s) of the new body
- Makes newspapers’ membership of the new body compulsory
- Requires consistency between the broadcast watershed for sexually explicit material and newspapers.

In the longer term, the four women’s organisations are also calling for journalists to receive training on issues including sexism and myths and stereotypes about sexual and physical violence; and for the Culture and Media Select Committee, headed by John Whittingdale MP, to hold an inquiry into media sexism.

The new report highlights the fact that the government's strategy on ending violence against women in all its forms, and the work being lead by Number 10 on sexualisation which has included Mothers Union head Reg Bailey leading an inquiry and making recommendations on advertising, internet controls, music videos and video games, are both undermined by persistent media sexism and discrimination of the kind discussed.

ENDS

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Notes to editors:

1. 'just the women' is what Newsnight editor Peter Rippon reportedly wrote in an email to a colleague concerning the lack of other authorities for evidence of Jimmy Savile's abuse.
2. 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.
3. Equality Now is an international human rights organisation working to promote and protect the rights of women and girls around the world. With 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.
4. Object is an award-winning human rights organisation which campaigns against the sexual objectification of women in the media and popular culture.
5. 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.
6. Turn Your Back on Page 3 is a campaign to end the Page 3 tabloid portrayal of women in the press.