

# Greater action must be taken in combating the sexual objectification of women in the print media

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*Last week the Leveson inquiry into the practices of the press turned to the issue of sexism in the media. Suvi Ramo of OBJECT argues that the objectification and sexualisation of women in British tabloid press is rife, and that this has a huge impact on societal attitudes. Greater regulation of print media is now needed in order to make it consistent with the regulation that already exists for other forms of media.*



On the morning of 24 January, the Leveson Inquiry, set up by David Cameron, the prime minister to investigate the culture, ethics and practices of the press, heard from four leading UK and international women's organisations about sexism in the media. Our organization, **OBJECT**, and **Eaves Housing, End Violence Against Women Coalition** and **Equality Now**, were called to present evidence at the Royal Courts of Justice with regards to media bias against women. We urged Lord Justice Leveson to make strong recommendations on media reporting and portrayal of women. The submissions highlighted, for example, the inaccurate and misleading news reporting on crimes of violence against women and the normalisation of stories and images which persistently objectify and demean women.

OBJECT is an award-winning human rights organisation which challenges the sexual objectification of women and girls in media and popular culture. We presented written and oral evidence that specifically focused on the way women are consistently portrayed as sex objects in the Page 3 tabloid press. Our submission emphasises the interconnection between 'sex object culture' and discrimination and violence against women. This has been acknowledged at the international level by the UN Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW has repeatedly **called upon states**, including the UK, to tackle the objectification of women in the media because of the attitudes and behaviours that 'sex object culture' promotes. Considering that we live in a society in which one in three women will **experience** male violence in her lifetime and that women are still a long way away from enjoying equality with men, the issues raised by us at the inquiry are of grave concern.

Our submission provided the inquiry with a snapshot of '[A Week in the Life of The Sun, The Daily Star and The Sport](#)'. The purpose of the evidence, collected in November 2011, was to draw attention to the extent to which women are sexualised and objectified in the UK Page 3 tabloid press. The evidence highlights the numerous ways in which women and crimes against women – such as rape and assault – are consistently trivialised and hyper-sexualised in the press. The examples presented ranged from *The Sport*'s "nipple count" feature and "up-skirt" front page images to *The Star*'s lecherous and predatory reporting on 15-year-old Charlotte Church being a "big girl now" and looking "chest swell". Notably, this type of treatment of women as mere sexual objects and sexualised body parts has no parallel for men, thus illustrating the double standard and clear evidence of sexism verging on misogyny in the tabloid press.

The witness statement provided by Anna van Heeswijk, Campaigns Manager at OBJECT, raises concern about the normalisation of portraying women as sex objects and the consequent effects on the treatment of women and girls. As a society, we generally agree that this form of hyper-sexualised and objectifying imagery has, at the very least, the potential to be harmful. This is why we do not allow it in the workplace, in schools or on the television before 9pm. Yet, in spite of the common concern about the sexual objectification of women and the sexualisation of children, the Page 3-type tabloids are

present in the mainstream.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Page 3 imagery is already prohibited in the workplace under [sexual harassment legislation](#). Therefore, if sexually objectifying imagery is already restricted in the workplace and on television pre-watershed, it is logical that it should not be displayed in freely available, openly displayed and unrestricted newspapers that are often left lying around. Our recommendations do not, therefore, call for censorship or a radical alteration of policies regarding the media, but rather for common-sense and consistent application of media regulation. We also recommend that the category of ‘groups’ be included as a basis for complaint in the Press Complaints Commission’s complaints procedure. This would allow greater voice for the readers in regards to the culture and ethics of the press. Importantly, gender equality and issues related to sex-based discrimination should be distinct components of any new codes of practice for the print media. To this end, we also recommend the introduction of an independent regulatory body with teeth.

Ultimately, our testimony challenges the inquiry to consider the story that is told to girls and boys when mainstream newspapers depict men for what they do and women for what they look like. What effect is this likely to have on their aspirations and body image and in perpetuating stereotypes? As Professor [Rosalind Gill points out](#) when addressing the “increasingly narrow and sexualized roles” with which women are portrayed in the media: “young women are being sent the clear message that sexual attractiveness is more important than anything else about them.”

The concerns that we have raised are not questions of taste, censorship, nudity or sex. They relate to the story that the portrayal of women in the tabloid press tells about how we value women. They call for applying the same guidelines that already exist for broadcast material to print media so as to achieve greater consistency with regards to curbing harmful stereotypes. This would not restrict coverage of sex and sexuality – the Sex Education show airs before 9pm on television – but it would restrict gratuitous portrayal of women as mere sex objects. As Professor Gill adds; “we are seeing a resurgence of sexism in recent years as part of a ‘culture of cruelty’ that is played out disproportionately over women’s bodies”. In light of this, we must consider the impact that the relentless and increasingly narrow depictions of women as sex objects has in contributing to a culture of sexism, a culture of “post-political correctness” where objections to sexist imagery is labelled “humourless whingeing”. The effects this has on how women view themselves and how they are treated is of particular concern in relation to young girls and boys who are shaping their identities and forming their perspectives.

In our conclusion presented to the inquiry, we remind that newspapers communicate, shape and reflect the ideas and values of the society we live in. The portrayal of women in the Page 3 tabloid press is one-dimensional and stereotyped, offering a serious misrepresentation of women to the readers of the mainstream press. The first question is: why are these newspapers printing such degrading misrepresentations? This is a question which should be addressed to the newspaper editors and owners themselves. The question that follows is: why are they allowed to get away with it?

Considering that the inquiry itself felt it necessary to censor the examples that we provided when circulating it, one must ask how it is justifiable to sell the same imagery to anyone with 50 pence. We are ultimately calling for a print-based media that is socially responsible, responsive to the public interest and which adheres to common principles of equality and social justice. At the end of the inquiry’s hearing, Anna van Heeswijk said: “This Inquiry presents a golden opportunity to tackle the Page 3 portrayal of women in the press. We presented the evidence; we suggested the solutions, now we keep up the pressure until Leveson, and ultimately the Government, take the action.”

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**About the author**

## **Suvi Ramo – *OBJECT***

Suvi Ramo is a current intern and administrator at the campaigns group [Object](#). For her postgraduate studies, she was awarded the Laurel Brake Prize for outstanding performance in MA/MSc Gender Studies and is currently editing her final thesis for journal publication. Suvi has gained experience in the women's sector by volunteering for the women's group at Amnesty International in Finland and acting as the Fundraising Assistant for Object in 2011.

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