

13/12/2011

## **Wish's Submission to the Leveson Inquiry on Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press**

### About Wish and the women we represent

Established in 1987, Wish is the only national, user-led charity working with women with mental health needs in prison, hospital and the community. It provides independent advocacy, emotional support and practical guidance at all stages of a woman's journey through the Mental Health and Criminal Justice Systems. Wish acts to increase women's participation in the services they receive, and campaigns to get their voice heard at a policy level. It is unique in its long-term commitment to each individual, as they move through hospitals, prison and the community.

### Our concerns with press ethics and practice

Our members experience discrimination based on their gender and because of their mental health status. They may also encounter stigma because of their involvement in the Criminal Justice System. This takes place within statutory services where services can be skewed towards meeting the needs of men or where women are stereotyped as difficult to work with. Discriminatory attitudes are also faced in the wider world. The press have significant influence over the way people understand those with mental health needs, women and offenders and those who have all these labels. In our submission we will outline the role of the press in creating and reinforcing stigma in relation to women, those with mental health needs and those who are within the Criminal Justice System.

#### I. The representation of women in the press

The lives of women using Wish services are affected by the way women are represented within public spaces. Too often the press portray women in association with a limited range of roles and concerns, especially appearance, consumerism and relationships. Evidence about this narrow portrayal of women and their interests has been collected by the Representations of Women in the Media Project, started by the Bristol Fawcett Society. Their research into the way women are shown within the media uncovered five key themes.

**Objectification:** women are idealised, are in the media for how they look, not for what they do and always to be "beautiful".

**Absence:** women and girls are missing; they are not as numerous or diversely represented as men.

**Misrepresentation:** women are represented very narrowly, as wives, girlfriends, mums, preoccupied with dieting and shopping.

**Exploitation:** women's bodies and female sexuality are used to sell products and sensationalise content.

Distortion: unrealistic representations of “beauty” are damaging body image and the way we value women

The effects of these representational themes can be seen in the lives of the women who use Wish services. Many have distorted views of their own bodies, eating disorders, low self-esteem especially in relation to entering education or employment and great difficulty in removing themselves from harmful relationships. Whilst we recognise that these barriers to wellbeing may be a result of a variety of factors, we feel that the representation of women contributes to the narrowing of women’s choices and opportunities, especially in the face of difficult life circumstances. The nature of the scrutiny of women by the press, in terms of complying with female norms of behavior and appearance, is of concern. The culture of scrutinising women’s behaviour to a greater extent than men is reflected in the treatment of male and female patients within secure hospitals. Wish’s research published in the report, *Good girls: surviving the system*, found women being treated more harshly than men and being denied privileges and freedoms that men are allowed. Such unequal standards are perpetuated through common media practices.

## 2. The reporting of mental health

Stigmatisation and the negative and malicious portrayal of those with mental needs have a constraining and harmful effect upon people’s lives. Strong evidence comes from the Rethink Shout Stigma Survey carried out in 2008. The survey found that close to 9 out of 10 service users (87%) reported the negative impact of stigma upon their lives. Common examples were being misunderstood by family members, shunned and ignored by friends, work colleagues and health professionals, and being targeted by neighbours for abuse. Two-thirds of people responding to the survey have stopped doing things because of the fear of stigma, discrimination and hostility. Women were more likely to answer that they have limited their behavior because of mental health stigma.

The role of the media was seen as very important in creating stigma but also addressing it. The vast majority of people responding to the survey believed that the representation of mental health within the media had the greatest impact upon people’s understanding of and attitudes towards mental health. The WordsMatter website ([www.wordsmatter.org.uk](http://www.wordsmatter.org.uk)) collects examples of poor practice in the Media’s reporting of mental health which continue to reinforce negative stereotypes and stigma. Examples include uniformed representation of those with mental health needs and the regular use of discriminatory language. Those who have experience stigma and responded to the Rethink survey believe that in order to challenge stigma the press is the route to reach the largest numbers of people.

## 3. The portrayal of those within the Criminal Justice System

Wish is concerned that those who commit crimes and are within the Criminal Justice System are presented in ways that contribute to the misunderstanding and stigmatisation of those who enter that system for a wide variety of reasons. As the submission from the Howard League for Penal Reform attests, there is widespread acknowledgement that continual negative and narrow representation of those within the Criminal Justice System has contributed to a greater fear of crime amongst the public and an increasingly harsh sentencing regime that has swelled the prison population to record levels.

Individual examples of reporting have had wide-ranging and harmful effects. An example of this is the Sun’s story about the Halloween Party at HMP Holloway in 2008. A

number of women who use our services have or will serve custodial sentences in HMP Holloway. The media story which used photos from the Halloween Party have constrained the work the prison can do with women to address the causes of their offending and begin rehabilitation. Women we work with come from backgrounds of abuse and neglect and poor mental health. The lack of services available to support women with multiple needs in the community means the criminal justice system can be the point at which they are helped to turn their life around. Within this environment it is important they have a chance to build more positive social relationships and improve their social skills. With the prison fearful of further negative publicity they are reluctant to organize events which combat women's isolation and lack of support networks during their sentence. The use of sensationalised stories of offenders limit the work the Criminal Justice System can do to address the cause of women's offending and treat them humanely.

The press's reporting of crime can be harsher and more sensationalised when women are the perpetrators rather than men. Men commit the vast majority of crimes. Women offenders, possibly because they are seen to be acting outside the 'norms' of female behavior are represented as deviant and fascinating. Their stories are widely publicised and presented in extreme terms. The coverage of the Amanda Know case is a high-profile example of the vilification and exploitation of women and their lives by the press. A woman that commits a crime may have her story widely covered in the press whilst a man committing the same crime may not face the same level scrutiny and reporting. The press's practices in representing women offenders fuels the stigma our members faced day-to-day and when trying to secure employment. As a result women's rehabilitation and the rebuilding of their lives are much harder when the encounter with the criminal justice system is over.

How the press's representational role could be improved

The way the press represents women with mental health needs and women offenders can have a negative effect on women's life opportunities, their recovery and their rehabilitation. We believe improved official monitoring of and reporting on the representation in the press of women in general, women with mental health needs and women offenders would help draw attention to these imbalances and injustices. The ethical reporting of women with mental health needs could be addressed by having women with mental health needs represented in the monitoring body.

**Statement of Truth**

**I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.**

**Signed** .  .....

**Date** .....14/2/2012.....