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## **Submission to the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press**

### **About MRCF**

Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum (MRCF) was formed in 1993, in response to the needs of newly arrived refugee and migrant communities, as well as those that had settled in north and west London. A registered charity, MRCF is user-led and works to promote the rights of refugees and migrants in the capital. It was established by migrants and refugees who had hoped that mutual support would be an effective means of tackling the barriers commonly experienced by members of their communities in accessing services.

MRCF's work practically addresses the social exclusion of refugee, migrant and ethnic minority communities. We also advocate strategically for change to national policies, with the overall aim of achieving equality for all. MRCF brings together those with different migration experiences, origins, cultures and languages, to work together towards common goals; be it access to legal advice or petitioning policymakers, holding cultural events or running supplementary schools, fighting deportation or starting a charity, writing a blog on an issue of common concern or studying for a qualification verification exam.

The underlying purpose of all these activities is meaningful integration into British society.

### **Why make a submission to the Inquiry?**

MRCF would like to draw the attention of the Leveson Inquiry to the practices of certain sections of the British press in reporting immigration and protection (asylum) issues. In particular, MRCF wishes to highlight the failure of the press to provide the British public with accurate, objective and factual information, raising serious concerns about the media's ethics, standards, professionalism and motives.

MRCF believes that freedom of the press is essential to every democratic society. We also believe that with freedom comes responsibility. We all have a right and a responsibility to engage in the

immigration debate in an informed, balanced and reasonable way, in order to ensure equality and justice for all.

MRCF believes that sections of the British press, through their frequently biased, inaccurate, inflammatory and hostile reporting of immigration and protection issues, make a rational debate impossible. Further, such reporting is against the public interest, because it creates a false perception about a vulnerable group of people, damages race relations, aids in the rise of the extreme right and demonises vulnerable minorities.

Such media coverage exerts pressure over successive governments, resulting in knee-jerk policies that further erode the position of asylum seekers and create a vicious cycle of stigma and hostility. Politicians have a lot to answer for, as do the journalists, editors and commentators who have engaged in such irresponsible and unprofessional behaviour. In addition, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has failed to prevent this abuse of the freedom of speech, instead allowing it to deteriorate into open hate speech.

In this submission, MRCF hopes to point the Leveson Inquiry towards credible evidence of this negative media discourse on immigration, that we hope will be taken into consideration when recommendations are made about media ethics, professionalism, practices and standards, as well as in the consideration of safeguards that can be introduced to prevent further abuse, inaccuracies and bias.

We would also urge the Leveson Inquiry to consider the inadequate mechanisms of redress that are currently in place. Presently, the system of media self-regulation makes it almost impossible for organisations such as MRCF to challenge poor practices, bias and inaccuracy on behalf of vulnerable individuals who are stigmatised, misrepresented, insulted, and unable or afraid to complain to the press or the PCC.

Below, we provide some examples of media conduct and key points from research and reports that illustrate the deficient media coverage of immigration, and we provide references for all our sources. We respectfully request that the Leveson Inquiry fully examine these documents, which provide credible evidence of the damage caused by irresponsible journalism, both to this vulnerable section of the population and the wider British society.

We sincerely believe that the Inquiry will make a huge impact in raising standards, professionalism and ethics across all sections of the British press. We hope that by doing so, the Inquiry will facilitate factual, accurate and objective reporting on immigration and asylum.

### **Immigration and Protection (Asylum) in the Media**

In the past 10 years, media coverage of immigration has increased in both volume and hostility towards all categories of immigrants, to the point of demonising them completely.

In 2001, the Association of Chief Police Officers expressed concerns that "Racist expressions towards asylum seekers appear to have become common currency and acceptable in a way which would never be tolerated towards any other minority."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Alarmist reports on refugees 'must stop'*, The Guardian, Tuesday 23 January 2001  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/jan/23/immigration.immigrationandpublicservices>

In 2003, in a report entitled *What's The Story?*<sup>2</sup>, Article 19, the international organisation which fights censorship and defends people's right to free speech, found that media reporting of the asylum issue is characterised by an inaccurate and provocative use of language to describe those entering the country to seek asylum. Fifty-one different labels were identified as making reference to individuals seeking refuge in Britain, including derogatory and incorrect terms such as 'illegal refugee', 'asylum cheat', 'would-be asylum seekers', 'would-be immigrants' and 'would-be refugees'.

The report also found that the asylum debate focuses overwhelmingly on the number of people entering the country to claim asylum, but the statistics which were presented in media reports are frequently un-sourced, exaggerated or inadequately explained.

Asylum seekers and refugees feel alienated, ashamed and sometimes threatened as a result of the overwhelmingly negative media coverage of asylum. Many of the Article 19 report interviewees had direct experience of prejudice, abuse or aggression from neighbours and service providers, which they attributed to the way in which the media informs public opinion.

Asylum seekers and refugees are reluctant to complain about inaccurate or prejudicial reporting. Interviewees for the Article 19 research expressed a mixture of doubt that their views would be accurately represented and concern about the consequences of being seen to complain.

When accused of being racist, chauvinist or xenophobic (and, therefore, acting *against* the public interest), editors justify what they publish by claiming that their sales demonstrate that they are representing the public interest. Thus, when reinforcing their audience's opinions, no matter how inaccurate, they argue that they are serving the public interest by giving their readers what they want. This is, of course, to confuse the meaning of 'public interest'—a central problem in trying to confront sloppy journalism and unprofessional editorial practices.

Pejorative language used by politicians and the media makes the situation much worse. Talking tough simply constructs a social problem in the minds of the public and reinforces a vicious circle of tabloid headlines, leading to public hostility, and to ever tougher pronouncements.

Numerous polls on public opinion about immigration identified the issue as a source of social instability and a continuing challenge to the rule of law. In a poll commissioned in 2008 by the Independent Asylum Commission for the *Saving Sanctuary*<sup>3</sup> report, 69.7% of respondents said that information they received regarding migration did not distinguish clearly enough between asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrant groups.

The Centre for Social Justice, a conservative think-tank chaired by Ian Duncan-Smith, produced a report on asylum<sup>4</sup> in 2008 which stated:

the language of asylum is highly emotionally charged—and ripe with signification (swamped, tidal wave, draw the line, allow in etc.) It is very physical, geographical, the language of islanders aware of the vulnerability of their separation and interconnectedness' (p 90).

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<sup>2</sup> *What's the story? Media Representation of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK*, Article 19, 2003

<sup>3</sup> *Saving Sanctuary*, Independent Asylum Commission, 2008

<sup>4</sup> *Asylum Matters – Restoring Trust in the UK Asylum System*, A Report by the Asylum and Destitution Working Group Chaired by Julian Prior, The Centre for Social Justice, December 2008

The Centre for Social Justice also commissioned a report by YouGov to gauge the UK public's opinion on asylum. YouGov asked a representative sample of 2,564 and 2,313 individuals respectively across the UK for their view on various aspects of the asylum system. When asked to list the top three countries that most asylum seekers came from, Poland and Romania scored highly with 22% and 21% respectively being selected. However, as these countries are both part of the EU, there would be no need for people from these countries to claim asylum in the UK to be able to reside here. 30% thought that the media reported asylum issues 'fairly', 28% said they were 'unfairly biased against asylum applicants' and 29% didn't know. But 64% of those polled had never met an asylum seeker, with 30% saying that they had and 6% saying that they did not know (pp 95-96).

The report *Victims of Intolerance*<sup>5</sup> by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reveals that *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star* and their three Sunday editions – *News of the World*, *Mail on Sunday* and *Express on Sunday* – between them produced a staggering 8,163 articles that mentioned the word 'asylum seeker' in the five years from 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2006 – almost 5 articles per day, every day, for 5 years!

The term 'asylum seeker' is often used interchangeably with 'immigrant' (1,427 tabloid articles with both words over the five-year period). An 'asylum seeker' in one line, becomes an 'immigrant' or a 'refugee' in the next, with 575 tabloid articles employing all three terms. Incorrect and misleading phrases such as 'illegal asylum seekers' and 'illegal refugees' have also been employed.

During the same five-year period, the term 'bogus asylum seekers' appeared 713 times in the seven UK tabloids, and 'asylum cheats' 188 times. The words 'criminal' and 'asylum seekers' occurred in the same article 538 times; and 'crime' and 'asylum' appeared together 945 times (in 375 cases, within five words of each other). Fifty stories associated asylum seekers with rape – with titles like "Refugee is rape beast," "Migrant monster" and "Iraqi in rape quiz." 'Asylum' shared an article with 'madness' 271 times, 141 of them in *The Sun*, which at the beginning of 2003 ran a campaign called 'Stop Asylum Madness.'

According to *The Sun*, 839,000 of its readers cut out coupons which appeared in the paper daily over a period of several weeks, in conjunction with an apparently never-ending series of 'asylum madness' news stories. The coupons were periodically taken in a large number of sacks, with *Sun* photographers in tow, and dumped at the Home Office. A few weeks later, the paper announced that more than 1 million readers had signed on to the campaign and told the government menacingly: "The clock is ticking."

In its Tenth Report<sup>6</sup> on the Treatment of Asylum Seekers, the Joint Committee on Human Rights in 2007 expressed the following concerns:

The treatment of asylum seekers by the media raises questions about whether the state is fulfilling its positive obligations to protect asylum seekers from unjustified interference with their right to respect for their dignity, private life, and physical integrity, and to secure their enjoyment of Convention rights without discrimination, consistently with the right to freedom of expression. Signatories to the 1951 *Refugee Convention*, which include the UK, have specific responsibility to protect people forced by a well-founded fear of persecution to flee their countries and seek asylum (p.98).

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<sup>5</sup> *Victims of Intolerance*, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2006

<sup>6</sup> *The Treatment of Asylum Seekers Tenth Report of Session 2006–07*; House of Lords and House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2007

We are concerned about the negative impact of hostile reporting and in particular the effects that it can have on individual asylum seekers and the potential it has to influence the decision making of officials and Government policy. We are also concerned about the possibility of a link between hostile reporting by the media and physical attacks on asylum seekers (p 101)

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The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) did not accept that there was a major problem. It told us: "The number of complaints (received by the PCC) does not reveal a huge groundswell of concern about them from people against the national press, given that they can complain about issues to do with accuracy, privacy, intrusion, discrimination about individuals and so on" (p 102).

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The CRE did not consider that the PCC's guidance had been sufficient to prevent negative and prejudicial reporting, particularly in the tabloid media, and that it had not helped to reduce community tensions. The CRE wrote to the PCC in April 2006, proposing two amendments to the Code of Practice; including "gross exaggeration" in the scope of Clause 1 and amending Clause 12 to widen the prohibition of discrimination to include racial, ethnic or religious groups. The PCC Editor's Code of Practice Committee declined to make the suggested amendments suggested by the CRE (p 103).

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We note that other jurisdictions have included more robust protection for groups within a framework of self regulation and freedom of expression and recommend that the PCC draws on best practice from overseas. The right to free speech is sacrosanct in the USA, but has not prevented the media from working within a Code which provides protection for vulnerable groups. For example, the Code of Ethics from the US Society of Professional Journalists includes the imperatives to "Tell the story of diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so" and to "Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labelled and not misrepresent fact or context" (p 105).

In his oral evidence<sup>7</sup> to the JCHR, Mr Travis, the Guardian Home Affairs Editor, who gave evidence together with Mr Esser of *The Daily Mail* and Mr Hill of *The Daily Express*, made the following illustrative submission:

**Mr Travis:** Can I just comment on that? I think there are three parties dancing this particular unsavoury tango here. You have the politicians, the public and the media locked in a rather unsavoury vicious circle. Newspapers such as Mr Hill's and Mr Esser's claim they reflect the views of their readers; politicians faced that media barrage in one particular heightened period in 2003. Over a 31-day period the *Daily Express* ran no less than 22 front-page lead stories on the subject of asylum based mostly on guesstimates from unofficial sources. In this situation, newspapers both fuel that political prejudice and fuel that extremism. Recent Mori research in this area showed that *Daily Express* readers think that 21% of the British population are immigrants. The *Daily Mail* readers say it is about 19%. *Guardian* readers say it is about 11%. We are all actually exaggerating. It is only 7%. Even FT readers, who seem to be the "best informed in the country", as their slogan goes, got somewhere near at 6 or 7%. We have all exaggerated this problem in that respect, so it becomes fuelled. The idea that this is some kind of balanced, accurate reflection of public opinion on this subject is belied by the fact that Mr Hill's newspapers in the past printed manifestly false stories—fantasy land. We had from the *Daily Star*: "Asylum seekers have stolen nine donkeys from Greenwich Royal Parks and eaten them." It is supposedly based upon fact, you know—and police saying they think they killed

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<sup>7</sup> The full transcript of this evidence hearing to JCHR can be found on <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200607/jtselect/jtrights/81/7012204.htm> and additional report on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/jan/23/pressandpublishing.immigrationasylumandrefugees>

them and ate them—and the only quote from the police in the story is, "we are totally baffled over what happened to the donkeys".

Further examples of inaccurate and distorted tabloid coverage can be found on **the Tabloid Watch** website, which also contains links to alternative sources of information that challenge tabloid reports on various issues. The debunked distorted reports about asylum can be found at:

<http://tabloid-watch.blogspot.com/search/label/asylum>

The most plastic example of a completely invented story concerning asylum seekers is the so-called 'Swan Bake'. It illustrates the PCC's inability to prevent unprofessional, biased reporting that leads into urban myth-making.

The original story was published by *The Sun* (front page article, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2003) and it was proven to be untrue. The Sun printed an apology on page 41 a few months later, as summarised in the Press Gazette:

"Sun accused of Swan Bake 'myth-making':

<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=24624&sectioncode=1>

The apology was a result of investigative efforts by MediaWise and other refugee advocates.

In August 2003 *The Daily Star* expanded the 'Swan Bake' and came up with this story about donkeys

"PCC investigates Star donkey story":

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2003/nov/05/pressandpublishing.immigrationasylumandrefugees>

Despite the intervention and apology in 2003, in 2008 *The Sun* came back with the Swan story—this time alleging it was Eastern Europeans who ate them

"Who ate all the swans?": <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article855857.ece>

And *The Daily Mail* joined in

"Swan bake: carcasses and piles of feathers found next to cooking pots at migrants' camp":

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-521710/Swan-bake-carcasses-piles-feathers-cooking-pots-migrants-camp.html>

The Polish Federation in Great Britain complained to the PCC in 2008:

"UK Poles attack Daily Mail 'bias':

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/mar/14/dailymail.pressandpublishing>

In 2010 *The Daily Mail* resurrected the Swan Bake also accusing Eastern Europeans:

"Slaughter of the swans: As carcasses pile up and migrant camps are built on river banks, Peterborough residents are too frightened to visit the park":

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1261044/Slaughter-swans-As-carcasses-pile-crude-camps-built-river-banks-residents-frightened-visit-park-Peterborough.html>

The comment pages reflect journalists' lack of professionalism, and tabloid commentators have used freedom of speech as a cover for hate speech. The example of Tony Parsons' comment in the *Daily Mirror* sums it all up:

"Rights Mess Makes Britain a Soft Touch"<sup>8</sup>:

Ranting against the *Human Rights Act*, in May 2005 Mr Parsons referred to the case of a 29-year-old Nigerian mother of three, who was refused a heart transplant. She died while waiting for a Court ruling against the hospital's decision to refuse her a transplant, three days after Mr Parsons' article was published. The hysterical, heartless, offensive language used by Mr Parsons such as,

"When will we wake up to the fact that this country cannot wipe the bottom of the world?" and

"So we are stuck with the *Human Rights Act*. We are stuck with a Nigerian woman shrieking for a free operation for her dodgy ticker"

will remain on the *Mirror* website for many years to come and will continue to hurt Ms Ese Elizabeth Alabi's children and partner, who are all British residents.

The facts of the case, that were completely ignored by Mr Parsons, can be found in the BBC's coverage.<sup>9</sup>

In January 2010, Professor Heaven Crawley entered into a public debate with Mr Davis, MP, and made a comment about his statement that barbaric attitudes to women were imported into the UK. Professor Crawley characterised it as 'a crass misunderstanding of gender relations and why rape happens', adding that there were 'plenty of barbaric and backward' attitudes among men in all sorts of communities, including white British.

"Tory MP sparks race row after accusing immigrants of 'importing medieval views' about women"<sup>10</sup>:

That single sentence by Prof Crawley provoked the following attack by *The Daily Mail's* Quentin Letts:

"New Labour Heaven is hell for a Tory MP"

By [QUENTIN LETTS](#) 29th January 2010

Mr Davies was also attacked by Prof Heaven Crawley, 'director of the Centre for Migration Policy Research' at Swansea University. She tut-tutted that Mr Davies had used 'very dangerous words' by suggesting that in some instances 'barbaric' attitudes to women were 'being imported into this country'.

I urge you to visit the website of Prof Crawley's publicly funded centre in Swansea. Leftist buzzwords abound. The whole thing could be a pastiche of The Guardian's social policy pages. One of Prof Crawley's colleagues, Alan Finlayson, was author of the publication *Making Sense Of New Labour*. Good luck to him!

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/columnists/parsons/2006/05/15/rights-mess-makes-britain-a-soft-touch-115875-17078597/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/7256716.stm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1246851/Tory-MP-sparks-race-row-accusing-immigrants-importing-medieval-views-women.html#ixzz1c1NUdQrZ>

As for Prof Crawley, who took her MA in 'Gender and Development' at Sussex University, she was once head of the 'citizenship and governance programme' at a think-tank called the IPPR. It happens to be close to the Labour Party. She was also an adviser to the Labour- controlled Commons Select Committee on Home Affairs.

If journalists are looking for an objective critic, they could perhaps look elsewhere. I'd say Monmouth is lucky to have the forthright Mr Davies as its Member of Parliament. What he said was not 'dangerous'. What is really dangerous is when MPs feel scared of voicing widely shared opinions.

Meanwhile, if we get a Tory Government and it has to cut spending on universities, perhaps it could start by closing a certain migration policy research centre in South Wales.<sup>11</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this submission, we provide a snapshot of the frequently negative, unethical and irresponsible media environment in which we work, and which impedes our users' attempts to integrate into British society.

MRCF, like other organisations that provide assistance to immigrants, has no capacity to challenge tabloid press on a day-to-day basis and the process provided by the PCC is inadequate and inaccessible.

In addition, many of us are disempowered and have concerns that if we are to challenge the tabloid press we would be targeted in the same way our service users are—through inaccurate and biased stories.

We feel completely silenced and unprotected and unable to take part in the public debate.

We urge the Inquiry to strengthen the media's guidelines in order to ensure that immigration is reported accurately, with adequate interpretation and in context, and to establish mechanisms of redress in relation to inaccuracy and misinformation that causes irrational fears and encourages hostility towards immigrants and other vulnerable minorities.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1247152/QUENTIN-LETTIS-New-Labour-Heaven-hell-Tory-MP.html>

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Independent Asylum Commission, 2008

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200607/jtselect/jtrights/81/81i.pdf>

### *Asylum: Understanding Public Attitudes*

Miranda Lewis, IPPR, 30 Jun 2005

<http://www.ippr.org/publications/55/1364/asylum-understanding-public-attitudes>

### *What's the story? Media Representation of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK*

Article 19, 2003

<http://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/refugees-what-s-the-story-.pdf>

### *What's the story? Sangatte: a case study of media coverage of asylum and refugee issues*

Article 19, 2003

<http://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/refugees-what-s-the-story-case-study-.pdf>

### *Broadcast News Coverage of Asylum April to October 2006: Caught Between Human Rights and Public Safety*

Bernhard Gross, Kerry Moore & Terry Threadgold; Published by the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, 2007

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/resources/BroadcastNewsCoverageofAsylum.pdf>

### *The challenge of reporting refugees and asylum seekers*

Information Centre on Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) report on regional media events organised by the PressWise Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media (RAM) Project. Compiled by Nissa Finney, 2003

<http://www.mediawise.org.uk/www.mediawise.org.uk/files/uploaded/Challenge%20of%20reporting.pdf>