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Trans Media Watch

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Trans Media Watch condemns BBC failure to take responsibility for transphobic broadcast.

14th April 2011

Trans Media Watch, the organisation that campaigns for transgender people to be treated in the media with accuracy, dignity and respect, has condemned the BBC's response to complaints about a recent episode of Russell Howard's Good News. The episode contained a sketch based on the real life decision by a Thai airline to provide employment to kathoey (transsexual) women. It featured two highly sexualised trans characters who at one point revealed their male genitals to customers. It also showed a passenger being physically sick in response to the sight of these characters.

The BBC has argued that these characters were not intended to represent real transsexual women and that they were instead intended to "poke fun at the age old tradition of men dressing as women for laughs". This ignores the fact that specific mention of the real life news story was made when the sketch was introduced. It also misrepresents British comedy traditions in which comedians have spoofed certain female stereotypes rather than spoofing cross-dressing itself. Characters presented by the likes of Kenny Everett and Les Dawson would never have been revealed to have male genitals. Furthermore, they were affectionate caricatures, not objects of ridicule or physical disgust.

It is unclear on what basis the BBC thinks its viewers will be able to distinguish the

characters in this sketch from real trans people, especially as the public is generally poorly informed about trans people.

It is difficult to imagine the BBC justifying a similar comedy sketch whose subject was another minority group, such as Jewish people or black people.

Last month the BBC asserted that its own constitution provides protection for transgender people equivalent to that provided by Trans Media Watch's Memorandum of Understanding. It is evident from this sketch and from the response to complaints that this is not the case.

Trans Media Watch has produced widely respected research which demonstrates that the ridicule of trans characters on television harms real trans people in real life. Over a fifth of trans people have experienced verbal abuse inspired by material of this type, with many suffering it on a daily basis. Almost one in ten has been subjected to physical violence which they believe to have been related to an item or items in the media. Media misrepresentation and ridicule is also a significant factor in family breakdown.

The decision to employ kathoey women as flight attendants has been widely recognised as a positive social move, receiving praise from publications such as The Telegraph. Kathoey women are subject to prejudice in Thailand and often find it difficult to secure employment.

The BBC must take immediate steps to improve its approach to the representation of this vulnerable minority group.