

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement for Part 1, Module 1

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Witness Statement of Sheryl Gascoigne

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I, Sheryl Gascoigne, c/o Collyer Bristow LLP, 4 Bedford Row, London, WC1R 4DF, will say as follows:

Documents  
referred to

1. I make this statement in connection with my role as a Core Participant in the Leveson Inquiry.
2. For the purposes of this statement, I refer to a small paginated bundle of documents marked "SG1". Where I refer to page numbers in this statement, I am referring to pages in "SG1".

**Background**

3. To the general public I am the ex-wife of Paul Gascoigne, the retired English footballer.
4. Paul and I met in 1990 and began a relationship in the summer of 1991. We married in 1996. We divorced in 1998. We have one son together, Regan, who was born in 1996. I have 2 children from a previous relationship, Bianca and Mason.
5. As soon as I started my relationship with Paul mine and my children's personal life was thrust into the public eye. As a result of being married to a famous footballer our personal life has been scrutinized heavily by the newspapers over a period of more than 17 years. This intense scrutiny has continued despite me and Paul no longer being married.
6. Since divorcing in 1998 I have largely sought to keep the children and myself out of the public eye and subject to one or two exceptions, which I expand upon below, we now lead a relatively

quiet life.

7. It is public knowledge that Paul has a number of personal difficulties and health problems, including undergoing therapy for bulimia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, and alcoholism. It is also a matter of public record that I was a victim of domestic violence when in my relationship with Paul. Paul's difficulties have been heavily reported in the newspapers throughout his professional career and retirement.

**Press misconduct – libel**

8. Paul was an extremely successful footballer in his day and still remains a well known figure. During the height of his career, the newspapers and media were obsessed not just with his football career but also his private life. By virtue of me being in a relationship with Paul I featured in much of this coverage.
9. Paul was extremely talented. He is also very charismatic and fun loving. Looking back I can see how the press set out to establish Paul as a national hero. It appeared to me that during most of Paul's professional career, he could do no wrong in the newspapers' eyes and when Paul's behaviour sparked controversy (as it often did), the press (particularly the tabloids) seemed to want to avoid publishing any criticism of Paul but instead find someone else to blame for his behaviour. That person was often me.
10. Right from the beginning of our relationship until about 2010 when I was forced to take legal action, the press, without any justification, repeatedly portrayed me as a callous 'money grabber' who was at the heart of Paul's problems. The reality is that Paul was the love of my life but for various reasons our relationship did not work. Over the years I have felt that whatever has happened and regardless of Paul's actions – however extreme - the press automatically sought to blame me for his behaviour and portray me in a bad light.
11. Over a period of 17 years, from when I started my relationship with Paul until 2010, I read with disbelief the utterly untrue statements printed about me in connection with Paul. At the time, I did not feel

in a position to be able to respond or do anything about it, particularly in the early years. I thought it would simply make things worse, especially in relation to the impact on Bianca, Mason and Regan. I always tried to maintain a dignified silence. If I commented it seemed to get picked up by the tabloid press and twisted which just made things worse, so I took the view not to comment. I think this led to a lot of horrible things being written about me because the tabloids felt they could say whatever they liked and get away with it.

12. I attach copies of a selection of articles which demonstrate the massive intrusion into mine and my family's private lives and the hurtful nature of the untrue information put out there about me by the press:

Page 1 to 11

- a. The Sun, 23 June 1992, 'Wish your bird wasn't here, Gazza'
- b. The Daily Express, 2 August, 1994, 'Sheryl heads for reunion'
- c. The Daily Express, 4 August 1994, 'Sheryl has made the most of an odd match'
- d. The Express, 10 January 1998, 'What's the point of...Sheryl Gascoigne'
- e. The Express, 26 August 1998, '£8million penalty for Gazza'
- f. The Express, 6 November 1998, 'What's in a name Sheryl?'
- g. The Daily Star, 16 April 2003, 'Gazza Back'
- h. The Daily Star, 17 April 2003, 'Shazza's the Gazza whose life is sorted'
- i. The Daily Star, 27 April 2009, Gazza Lad, 13 & the 'Bong'

13. I do have one experience of making a complaint to the Press Complaints Commission which came about because of an article which was published about me in the 1990s. There have been so many articles written about me I cannot now recall which article it concerned. In any event, the PCC's involvement did not lead to a resolution and I did not feel as if they achieved anything.

14. After years of these nasty and untrue stories, and the portrayal of me as this callous money grabber who had destroyed Paul, it got to the point where maintaining a dignified silence was simply not working. In fact it was my children who pushed me to do something positive as they were desperate for me to stop what the papers were printing. So in about 2009 I made the decision to pursue legal action in the hope of vindicating my reputation and in order to discourage the press from continuing to publish lies about me.
15. I was already involved with solicitors (Clintons) in relation to family matters so I instructed them as they had all the necessary information about me to pursue a libel case. For example, they knew that the wild details being published about our divorce settlement and maintenance arrangements for the children were false.

16. I attach copies of articles of which I have complained of:

Pages 12 to 23

- a. Sunday Mirror, 22 March 2009, 'I blame Sheryl';
- b. The Daily Star, 16 June 2009, 'Sheryl's suing me for £100k..she'll kill me before the booze';
- c. The Daily Star, 17 June 2009, 'Marriage cost me £200,000 a day';
- d. The Daily Star, 14 October 2009, 'Gazza ex: I'm hated public enemy number one';
- e. The News of the World, 18 October 2009, 'You lying bitch'; and
- f. The People, 27 December 2009, Gazza heartache – 'Star in new booze fear after rift over son'.

17. In all of these actions I was successful, managing to obtain apologies (in all but one of the cases), a statement in open court, costs and damages. However, the real 'remedy' would have been for them not to have been published in the first place.
18. These articles provide just a snapshot of the untrue articles written about me; these were printed over the course of one year - when I was not even in close contact with Paul. Nevertheless, these few examples show the extent to which these untrue allegations have been published about me by the tabloids. As stated above, it has only been since 2009 that I have taken the conscious decision to

take action in respect of libels published about me.

19. It is fair to say that since taking legal action, I have noticed a considerable difference in the way the press write about me. It is clear to me that until you stand up to the tabloids, they feel they can get away with whatever they like. I wish I had taken legal action many years ago as it seems to be the only way to stop the tabloid press behaving in this atrocious way.
20. The thing I find difficult to comprehend is the lack of journalistic integrity. Over the years, journalists have obtained information about Paul, me and my family from a variety of unreliable sources and have not undertaken the most basic of fact checking exercises to find out whether or not the information provided is true. The onus was on the journalists to contact me to seek clarification of the story or obtain comment from me although they very rarely did. Once these untrue stories have been published the damage is done and the only recourse is legal action.
21. It is important that the Inquiry understands that taking legal action is not an easy decision. Pursuing libel proceedings against a newspaper is extremely expensive, time consuming and stressful. In the most recent libel claim I pursued against the Mirror I was ultimately successful but the case only settled just before trial. In the meantime, in the summer of 2010 (shortly before trial), I had to put my house on the market in order to fund my legal costs. Fortunately the case settled just before it was sold, but this demonstrates just what is at stake. Why should people like me have to go through this painful process when the onus should be on the journalist to check the facts before printing?

#### **Press misconduct – intrusive behaviour**

22. Over the years, I have found that the press have a blatant disregard for privacy. One example which sticks in my mind is in 1995 when the press photographed me sunbathing topless on a private beach whilst I was on holiday with Paul. I had no idea the press were taking photographs of me and intended to print them. I was mortified when I saw that these private photographs of me appeared in a

number of papers the next day.

23. When we were in a relationship (1991 to 1998), the press photographers followed my every movement. In particular freelance photographers used to camp outside our house and follow me by car whenever I left the house. It got so bad that I used to try to lose the photographers by driving round roundabouts several times or by driving into a housing estate so as to lose them. On one occasion I remember driving to a police station and asking what to do because the photographer would not stop hounding me. The Police advised me they could not take any action. It was extremely dangerous, particularly when the children were with me. However, I did notice a slight change after Princess Diana's death in 1997. I remember that I and the children used to crawl under the front window of our house so that the photographers could not see us moving in the house. There was one particular photographer who used to follow us, who the children nick-named 'the weasel'.
24. Fairly recently a photographer followed me in my car with the children all the way from Hertfordshire to Bluewater shopping centre in Kent. He stopped following me after I questioned what he was doing when we arrived at Bluewater. Despite the fact I try to keep my private life, private, everything seems to be linked to Paul. If something is going on in Paul's life it has a knock on effect on me and the children and results in us being followed. However, I notice that certain parts of Paul's life which the press chose not to report, go unreported. The press are very powerful in this respect; the public only gets to see what the press wants it to see.
25. I recall I attended an interview with, what was formerly, The News of the World, concerning the publication of my book, 'Stronger: My Life Surviving Gaza' in 2009. I took a friend with me as support. When the article was eventually printed my friend was outraged by what had been written because it was nothing close to what I had said in the interview. She could not believe how manipulative tabloid journalists could be.

#### **Impact of press misconduct on me and my family**

26. I am acutely aware of how I have been portrayed to the public by the newspapers. Whilst, as I have said, I have successfully sued in libel on a number of occasions, I know people do tend to believe what they read in the papers or at least tend to think that there is 'no smoke without fire'. The result is that I generally feel that people who I meet for the first time in day to day life think badly of me. I feel that people have pre-judged me based on what they have read about me in the papers before meeting me. I am constantly working hard to correct the image the tabloid press has deliberately created.
27. I am often told by people that I am nothing like what they expected. This is because of what the papers have written about me.
28. One of the reasons for publishing my book in 2009 was to set the record straight about my relationship with Paul in order to rebut some of the allegations made about me in the press. It was also to discuss openly the issue of domestic violence with a view to empowering women who are victims of domestic abuse. Campaigning about domestic abuse is one of the helpful things which has come out of my experiences with Paul.
29. In 2010 I agreed to appear on the TV programme, 'I'm a celebrity, get me out of here'. I had been asked to appear on the show 2 years previously and turned it down twice. However, last year a contestant dropped out at the last minute and when they asked me for a third time, I finally agreed. It was not an easy decision because I was worried about appearing on a reality television show like this, but then after discussions with my children I decided that it was another way to put things right and make people aware of who I really am as opposed to the years of tabloid portrayal of me in such a nasty and untruthful manner, Whilst my success in the libel actions I managed to bring after the event seemed to deter any repetition of these types of allegations, they could not really change people's views of what I was like given the scale of the press over the years. Having gone through the process of the programme, I believe that appearing on it has gone some way to do this. However, another reason for appearing on the TV programme was the income it generated for me; as a single mother of three children,

I do not earn a great deal of money.

30. As I have explained, one of the main concerns I have had is the impact which all of this has had on my children, They acutely feel I have been unfairly portrayed in the papers and they find this very upsetting. It was they who encouraged me go on 'I'm a celebrity get me out of here' so that the public would have an opportunity to see the real me.
31. As a result of this constant portrayal of me as some 'gold digging sponger' that only married Paul because of his fame, I even get criticised for retaining the surname, 'Gascoigne' – the accusation being that I am somehow trying to maintain a link to Paul's fame. As I am sure the Inquiry will understand, I am always going to maintain this surname whilst it is the children's surname; the children would hate if I had a different surname.
32. I know that my friends and family constantly have to defend me to people who have already formed an unfavourable opinion of me as a result of what they have read in the papers.
33. Whilst the damages and apologies I have secured do go some way to vindicating my reputation, it does not properly address the damage done, for the reasons I have explained. I would like to see better standards of journalism amongst tabloid papers. The onus should be heavily on the tabloid journalists to check the accuracy of sources and information - prior to publication rather than the onus falling on the victim to pursue legal action after publication. I think it is also important that apologies given in respect of defamatory statements are given greater prominence, to match the prominence which the original stories are given.

**Statement of Truth**

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

DATED the *23rd* day of November 2011

SIGNED:

Sheryl Gascoigne