THE NEWSROOM is the war zone for many women journalists, NUJ’s General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet told London Freelance Branch at its March meeting, shortly after International Women’s Day. It “makes me squirm when I’m introduced as the first woman General Secretary” of the NUJ, said Michelle: “it doesn’t sound good” that it took the Union a century to elect its first female Gen. Sec.

She related how “64 per cent of women responding to an International News Safety Institute survey reported that, yes, they had been subjected to harassment while they were reporting from hazardous areas. The majority of culprits were men in their offices, often including their bosses.”

Meanwhile, double standards apply to women journalists working in conflict zones. Channel Four News’s Lindsay Hilsun responded to safety advice following rapes of women journalists in Egypt by observing that while male journalists had also been assaulted and killed in Egypt she had not heard any advice to that demographic to stay out of the country.

While an estimated 40 per cent of the journalistic workforce nationally is female, Michelle cited a recent Guardian study of bylines across newspapers over a month which found 22 per cent were from journalists with female first names.

On the “double whammy of ageism and sexism” with “older women rare in broadcasting,” Michelle said the Union has “done a lot of work on older women in broadcasting” with “great personal settlements” – including back pay – for women who “discover years after joining that they are paid less.” At the Express newspaper, where Michelle was local workplace-based rep for the NUJ, “we fought for a woman who’d been put in a selection pool for redundancy” when freshly returned to work from maternity leave. One on occasion a colleague volunteered to take redundancy but the management turned round and said, “no, her” (that is, the woman who’d just returned to work). It ended in a settlement involving a “six-figure sum.”

At the other end of the spectrum of age and experience are “more women journalists forced to work for free... on long internships” with “examples particularly in magazines” where they are subject to sexual harassment at a time when they are “very fearful of rocking the boat.”

The NUJ compiled a dossier with evidence from staff and freelances which went to Dinah Rose QC’s inquiry into the BBC and Jimmy Savile, giving detail on contemporary “bullying, sexism, harassment”. It “had a massive impact” and led to the change in policy the BBC now have in place. There have been cases where abusers have been “stripped of management posts... sidelined on the way to a nice redundancy... this is progress to the way it should be.”

Michelle ended by ask women members to email their experiences of harassment and discrimination to her, in confidence: please email generalssecretary@nuj.org.uk.

Branch equality survey
London Freelance Branch Equality Officers Safiullah Tazib and Magda Ibrahim have put together a survey to find out what issues Branch members have with discrimination and equality. They write: “The Branch wants to find out about equality issues affecting freelancers, with the aim of formulating a definition of ‘equality’, and assisting members to overcome equality challenges. Please share your experiences with us in this short survey – and share your contact details if you are willing to talk further.” The survey is linked from www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1604surv.html

NUJ General Secretary Michelle speaking at LFB on women in journalism.

Photo: © Hazel Dunlop

Tie the Culture Secretary down, please

THERE ARE a range of government policies affecting journalism on the stocks. You have a chance of influencing them. Look up your MP at www.theyworkforyou.com

First, there’s the matter of changes to Freedom of Information law (see page 3). For a petition supporting extending the openness rules to private companies that run public services see www.bit.ly/public-FoIA

Next, there’s the controversial matter of press regulation. Unlike certain newspaper proprietors, the NUJ supports the recommendation of the Leveson Inquiry for an independent regulator and a “second phase” to determine how widespread press wrongdoing was, who was responsible, and the role of the police and politicians in covering it up. John Whittingdale MP, Culture Secretary as we went to press, wants to bury it. Please ask that Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, the “engine” for the press regulation proposals, is brought into force: Whittingdale wants to shelve it: see www.bit.ly/LevesonLetter

Last but not least, there’s the matter of control of the BBC. Whittingdale in March announced plans for a new BBC board – with the great majority of members appointed by government. There’s a petition against this at www.bit.ly/BBCboard

See references and links at www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1605peti.html