

Linnea Dunne, contribution to the Women's Aid Femicide Seminar 25th November 2016.

A friend asked me the other day: "What's with the persistent trope of women who cry rape? If literature and Hollywood were to be believed, it's an epidemic, when in fact it's incredibly rare."

What's with that trope? And does it matter?

We have court rooms where women are questioned about the underwear they choose when they go out, the number of sexual partners they've had, the amount they drink. It's almost as if we were assuming that they were lying.

So what's with the trope of women who cry rape – it's worth thinking about.

Then there's Donald Trump. A man who openly insulted women, who faced multiple allegations of sexual assault, who spoke about grabbing women by their genitals – that man was voted President of the United States.

What's with that?

Some say: "So? He'll feel up my wife – but Hillary would bomb Syria". I think that says a lot about how we normalise so-called locker-room talk, that he is referred to as a bit sleazy, a little bit disrespectful, when in reality he is misogyny and rape culture embodied.

It doesn't take a PhD to see what these two examples – and many others – say. We don't trust women. No matter what they've said, no matter what they've been accused of, we always trust men above women.

So what does this have to do with domestic violence?

A couple of months ago, I wrote a blog post that went viral. It was triggered by the narratives in the media reporting of the murder of Clodagh Hawe by her husband, where all the focus was on him and his past, and very little or nothing was said about her. We read about his love of handball, how committed and valuable he was to society, I quote, "quiet and a real gentleman".

In my piece, I argued that mainstream media – consciously or not – had contributed to a dangerous, patriarchal narrative by almost omitting Clodagh from the story, referring to her only as who she was in relation to the man who killed her. Speculation into her killer's mental health trivialised his crime while sending sympathy his way, rather than to her.

Mainstream media didn't like it. They highlighted that they didn't have access to photos of Clodagh, that locals were praising her husband in an attempt to make sense of it all, that no one wanted to speak about her. And I argued that none of that matters – that you can deal with grief whatever way you want but that journalists and editors have a greater responsibility.

I studied Political Communications for my master's, and as part of my dissertation I did a content analysis study of the representation of citizens in British press. It was my belief – as it is many media scholars' belief – that media not only mirrors society but recreates it, along with our identities. Therefore, the representation of citizens was interesting, as it could make or break the chances for engaged, meaningful citizenship.

“We are what we know and what we do not know we cannot be,” one professor argues. So if we report on sexual assault cases where victims are scrutinised and perpetrators walk free, what reality do we recreate? If we omit the narrative of a woman who lives in a relationship with an abusive husband, and write sympathetic stories about his past achievements and current mental struggles, what message do we send to other women like her? If we won't even use the words 'domestic violence' in reporting, how can we expect of the women who experience it to think that we're going to trust them when they need our support?

Domestic violence does not take place in a vacuum. It happens in a society where advertising employs images of women's bodies so distorted that it's sometimes hard to tell whether they are showing body parts or products. It happens in a world where disbelief is the knee-jerk reaction to the news of a man beating his wife, in a world where male politicians slap their female colleagues across the bum as a joke after a drink and tell them to “calm down, dear” when they speak passionately about politics. It happens in a world where failing to ask for consent from a pregnant woman is considered OK in the name of being “the safest country in the world to have a baby”. It happens in a world that doesn't trust women.

I joined a closed discussion network of more than a hundred feminists about a year ago. The women in the group grew very close very quickly, and many people shared very intimate, personal stories and experiences. As woman after woman after woman started sharing experiences of domestic abuse, of being controlled and disrespected, of living in fear, I found myself shocked and surprised. I'm a feminist, I read a lot about women's rights issues, and I know what the statistics look like – and *still* the reality of the lives behind the statistics shocked me.

We talk about this *so little*, that the normal, expected reaction to a domestic violence story is one of disbelief – like in the case of the murder of Clodagh and her sons. Is it really that surprising that someone in disbelief, someone who hasn't read much about feminism, who might never even have heard of rape culture, would struggle to trust women?

Hollywood paints a pretty clear picture: dangerous monsters, always strangers, attack people; normal people don't, and the women who say so are crazy and manipulative. But Women's Aid's research shows a very different reality: only 13% of women murdered in Ireland since 1996 were killed by a stranger – 54% were killed by a current or former partner and 33% by a male relative. Our media discourse needs to get up to speed – to help us name domestic violence, to help us recognise it when we see it, and to help us bring this suffering to an end.