

Brenda Power, contribution to the Women's Aid Femicide Seminar 25th November 2016.

A few years ago, a friend of mine was at home in her house, in an upstairs bedroom, with her newborn baby when she heard a noise on the landing. She went out and there was a burglar, outside her bedroom door, with a knife. She's a small woman and she can't even explain how this happened but instead of fear, she remembers feeling absolute, overwhelming rage – how dare this man threaten her baby. Somehow she bundled him into a bedroom and dragged across in front of the door a chest of drawers that, later on, it took two police officers to move. And then she rang the Gardai.

She lives in a nice Dublin six area, literally three minutes walk from the local garda station. She rang and explained what had happened, a man had threatened her with a knife, newborn baby, she'd locked him in a bedroom, could they please come quickly. It took 45 for the Gardai to arrive. She asked why, they shuffled their feet, looked at the floor, and said, 'we thought it was a domestic'. They thought from her description that she was talking about her husband or partner and that if they gave it half an hour or so, it'd all have blown over.

Your initial reaction is probably to become infuriated and frustrated and say, no wonder so many women are murdered, are injured, are reluctant to report a domestic incident – and I hate the term domestic incident, burning the toast is a domestic incident, a burst pipe is a domestic incident, but attacking another person with a knife, no matter who you are, no matter where it happens, is attempted murder.

But the reality, from the Gardai's point of view, is that most so-called domestic incidents don't go to court or if they do, the victim will change her statement and say it was all a mistake. Something like three per cent of violent domestic abusers actually end up in jail. In those circumstances, you can't blame Gardai for think they'll sort this out eventually, the phone call to the police might have brought him to his senses, she'll call back in half an hour to say it's all grand, or whatever.

Because, in these cases, the gardai and the victim have two different imperatives – the Gardai want a prosecution and a conviction, and the victim just wants the beatings and the assaults to stop. Most of the time, unfortunately, the second objective is not achievable without the first – until his cover of silence and secrecy has been blown, until he's been charged and convicted and jailed for beating his partner, until he has been shamed in front of other men, that man won't stop.

And, in fact, the approach of the Irish criminal process at the moment can potentially put a woman at more risk, when she plucks up the courage to call the Gardai, than if she didn't. Because when the Gardai arrive they can arrest the man without the victim's consent but they can't prosecute him without her consent. He knows, then, that all he has to do is to persuade her to withdraw her statement and he's a free man. This is an anomaly that's addressed in other jurisdictions – in Australia and some US states, for example – by allowing the police to testify, using photographs, using first hand accounts of their own observations, using the victim's initial statement, even if she does pull back. You can see how a change, to this effect, would instantly

enhance the safety of a woman who has taken the huge step of calling in the Gardai – she can't be terrorised into withdrawing her statement.

And terror, really, is at the heart of domestic abuse, or what we call domestic abuse and which I think was much better described by Nigella Lawson, after her then partner was pictured grabbing her by the throat, as 'intimate terrorism'. Terrorism operates primarily on threats and on fears – not necessarily on high body counts, but on the real possibility of a fatal attack: I'm going to kill you, and you know I mean it. Terrorism makes us change our ways so as not to inflame or incite or put ourselves at risk of attack. Terrorism makes us complicit in our own oppression, terrorism convinces us that if we look to our own behaviour, we'd have less to worry about.

In the past four months, there have been three very high profile cases where men have attacked their partners and children before killing themselves – the first was Marco Velocci, who stabbed his partner, put their three year old son into the front seat of his car, without a seat belt, and drove head on into a truck. The second was Alan Hawe, who killed his wife with an axe, stabbed his three little boys and then hanged himself, and the third was Tom Fitzgerald, a couple of weeks ago, who murdered his wife, attempted to murder his adult son having lured him to their home on false pretences, and then poisoned himself. I wrote about all three cases in the Sunday Times and the Daily Mail, and one thing that really struck me was a very clear gender divide in the readers' responses.

All three men were reported in the media to have been lovely fellows,

popular men, couldn't do enough for you, and Hawe and Fitzgerald were especially distinguished by having been classic pillars of the community, into the GAA and fundraising and local schemes and so on – note, by the way, they were active in male-dominated pursuits, so they valued the admiration of other men - praised to the skies by neighbours and even by clergy. One neighbour said about Tom Fitzgerald, 'anything good that happened in the parish, Tom was into it.' I would have thought that the worst thing that ever happened in the parish, Tom was into it - but a worrying response, and it came overwhelmingly from men, was he shouldn't be defined by one bad mistake.

Male readers showed a far greater tendency to what I would call absolutism, what they would call compassion, while women showed a far greater awareness of the 'street angel, house devil' phenomenon. Men accused me of being heartless and judgemental, but women, almost without exception, said 'I know this guy, we know him, we've all come across him, we met him, we lived with him, we married him and we are sick and tired of being told he doesn't exist.'

One woman said, listening to the priest's words about Tom Fitzgerald, you'd think he had died saving somebody's life. They were all horrified at the acceptance of burying women with their murderers as part of this denial. They were disgusted at the willingness of these communities to perpetuate the 'Hail fellow' myth that these men had created around themselves. And so many of them said, and said it with feeling, God only knows what those women put up with before that day.

I think society in general, but men as the lawmakers and the judges and the police in particular, need to wake up to the fact that domestic violence is the sneakiest and most surreptitious of crimes, and, astonishing as this may seem, collecting at mass and training the under 12s and buying your round doesn't necessarily mean that you don't go home and beat your wife – the bigger the front, let us not forget, the bigger the back.

One statistic that prompted a bit of a debate with a male friend of mine, last week, was Dr Rhona Mahony's claim that one in eight pregnant women, coming into Holles Street, shows signs of being attacked by her partner, with the stomach being the most common target for kicks and punches. My friend thought this was unlikely, and said that the statistic isn't reflected across the wider female population, one in eight women are not presenting with assault injuries or claiming to be victims of domestic abuse. Actually, I had to point out that the true figure is more like one in five, but of course they're not all being picked up and reported. And my argument was that pregnancy is the only time you have to keep regular medical appointments, you have to go to your clinic, roll up your sleeve for a blood pressure test, expose your stomach for a scan, so injuries are more likely to be picked up. Isn't it just possible that one in eight, at least, are being regularly beaten by their partners and pregnancy is the only time they can't hide it? Again, I think the majority of decent men who'd never dream of lifting a finger to a partner need to really listen to the evidence and acknowledge that the lovely fellows and the pillars of the community and the chap who'd do anything for you is perfectly capable of being a violent bully behind closed doors.

There was a recent case, before the courts, of a man charged with raping his wife and assaulting her with a hammer so badly that she needed 14 stitches in her head. And it was put to the wife, in the witness box, that she was an intelligent, high-achieving woman and here she was recounting several instances of extreme violence and assaults. She'd waited five months before making the rape claim – why didn't she do it sooner and why did she stay with her husband, if he was such a violent man? I know he was entitled to defend himself – it didn't work, by the way, he was convicted by a predominantly male jury and jailed for ten years – but that question, legitimate as it was, underpins a mindset that mitigates against women reporting abuse: Why'd you marry him, why'd you stay with him, why'd you live with him, why'd you go back to him if he's so bad? Why do women endure an average of 35 assaults by a partner, according to international figures, before they first contact the police?

Those are tough questions for women to answer in a witness box, because they often can't explain it to themselves. Why didn't you run out the door, tell your family, tell your friends, tell the Gardai the first time your man hits you? Wouldn't you go straight to the police, after all, if a stranger attacked you with a hammer?

The difference is, of course, that the stranger isn't the person you chose as a life partner, and you won't have to bring your children to visit the stranger in prison if he's convicted of your assault.

And, also, because women are people pleasers, we are conscious of our weaker physical status and our self-preservation instincts are of necessity more acute than those of a big strong man. I was very struck

by a comment by one of the women who accused Donald Trump of sexual assault, after he admitted it on the Access America tape. He'd groped her brazenly, when they first met, and then they both had to go into some function together. He took a seat and she sat some distance away and he saw her, and he said to her, "Come and sit beside me", and she said, "I complied."

And I thought, that statement is as comprehensible to women as it is baffling to men. Why did you stay with a bullying man, why did you shore up his perfect facade, why did you agree to withdraw the charges against him? 'I complied'.

The question for today is, what can we do about these men? As I've said, there are obvious legislative changes that will help – one being allowing Gardai to testify where a statement is withdrawn, another is the new Domestic Violence Bill which removes the requirement that you must have an equal share in the property before you can get a barring order, in other words, if you're living with a partner who owns the house you can still get them barred.

Most of all, though, we have to change the way we talk about the perpetrators and the victims of domestic violence. Behind all of these absolutions – the poor man, he had a moment of madness, he just snapped – is an implicit guilt on the part of the victim: she must have done something to provoke him. We have got to speak out, and priests have got to speak out, about the practice of burying women with their murderers, which has happened twice here in the past two months. I fear it is something that families are coerced into, in a vulnerable state of shock and grief, and which they might well live to

regret.

Given how very concerned men like Hawe and Fitzgerald are about their status in the community, and especially in the eyes of other men, Alan Hawe was so anxious about his status that he wrote a letter explaining himself, we have got to be free to denounce them, and the church has to find the courage to condemn their actions at their funeral masses, so that others watching will know that you can raise all the funds you want and run all the committees you like and buy all the pints you can afford but none of that will ever be mentioned and will count for nothing if you raise a hand against a partner.

I think we have to look at issues that might underlie domestic abuse, and one I believe is underestimated as a factor is parents slapping their children – which, of course, the Pope has said is acceptable if it is done with love and dignity. Newsflash, Your Holiness, there is no loving and dignified way for a big person to hit a smaller person in a fit of temper but I believe what that experience does is it internalises the message that it is alright for a bigger, stronger, angrier person to strike you, if you annoy him, and that it is probably your fault. So let's do away with the old 'it didn't do me any harm' myth: If you have ever struck somebody, as an adult, if you have ever been struck, as an adult, then it did. Everybody who has ever lashed out at somebody else was hit by a bigger person first. That would certainly explain a lot of the shame which surrounds domestic violence and which keeps it such a secret.

And, finally, we have to stop treating it as such a secret. A lot of women have come out recently and said they've had abortions, as part of the Repeal the Eighth campaign, and that's a worthwhile way of addressing the stigma. Now we need women to start holding their hands up and saying, yes, me too. Remember the Yes All Women hashtag of a couple of years back, making the point that all women – and I'd include myself in this – have at some stage been put in physical fear by a man, a stranger or a partner or whoever. I think we need an equivalent campaign of candour around intimate terrorism. If you can say yes, I've had to cover a bruise, yes, I have told my work colleagues that I tripped or that my partner accidentally elbowed me in his sleep, yes I got a slap or a punch or a kick, then say it. This will not be easy, because unless you've made a complaint to the police and it has been prosecuted then you're risking a defamation action, but if you have, and you can, then please do, say so.

I went to the Gardai a few years ago, on behalf of another woman who had been assaulted by a man in her life. She didn't want to press charges so I asked if they could speak to him, let him know that they were aware of him and what he was doing, and the response I got was, well, we don't do 'quiet chats'. Either she presses charges or we do nothing. I'm not sure there's not room for some middle ground approach there, which might be amenable to legislation. I was pretty confident that if this guy was confronted by another man, someone his own size, he'd have been mortified – again, he'd be very conscious of his status in the community. That is the only way to address the shame that victims feel, by turning it back on the attacker, by dragging these guys out into the light and into the proper judgement of their neighbours and their peers, and placing the guilt, placing the contempt, placing society's disgust where it rightfully belongs.

Because women are dying of shame. Women are dying at the hands of the men in their lives – predominantly partners and ex partners – because they are keeping quiet about these domestic demons who present a blameless front to the world. They're afraid to speak out, they're afraid to seek help, they're afraid to admit that the man they married, the man they chose, the father of their children has two very different faces. There was a great line in a letter from a domestic abuse victim, read out by Ryan Tubridy lately, when she talked about the tremendous relief of speaking out or escaping. You're stronger, she said, when you put the broken pieces back together, you have the same shadow but it's a deeper shade of black. It's as if keeping this secret diminishes your space in the world, makes you more porous or insubstantial so that you cast a weaker shadow. We have all got a role to play in filling in the gaps in these women's stories, the media, the clergy, the neighbours and friends, we have all got a duty to tell the truth about the lives they lead at the hands of violent men, and it is all the greater when they are not around themselves to cast any kind of a shadow, any more.