



Women, Harassment and Violence in Public Spaces.

By Sheila K. Martin, Secretary, PWC

Women have flown in space, been elected to senior Government positions, including that of prime minister and led the EU. Women have entered the top professions, won gold medals in the Olympics, owned newspapers and TV channels, had senior positions in the military, the police force and judicial system. Women have trekked to the North and South poles and won the Nobel Peace prize. Women have been CEO of large corporations and made invaluable contributions to science including the development of the mRNA vaccine for Covid 19.

Yet, here we are, shaken and outraged that a young woman, in day light has been murdered whilst running along a canal bank.

The United Nations, defines **violence against women** as “any act of gender-based **violence** that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to **women**, including threats.



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Women have grown up knowing that they must beware of the potential threat of violence and that 'they' as women have a responsibility to ensure they are safe.

When I was young, going out at night with my sister, cousins and friends to a popular late night venue, my mother would be on the doorstep, anxiously giving instructions. She never said, 'enjoy yourselves' or 'have fun'. Instead, she was issuing safety precautions, which we had to listen to every time we were heading out. "Stay together!" "Don't get into a stranger's car." **"Don't walk home in the dark, get a taxi together."** "If you have no money, just get the taxi; I'll go out and pay the driver."

When I was much older, I was into running and thought nothing of going out alone to run my 10km on the roads at night. When visiting my parents for Christmas, I recall one night I was heading out in the dark for my run and my father insisted on following me on his bike. Like most women I was frequently given the message that **the world was not a safe place for women and we should be careful.**

The murder of Aisling Murphy has brought the safety of women in public places, into the spotlight. A quick review of sites that offer advice to women about their personal safety, reveals a range of tips. Women are advised to lock their car doors on quiet roads at night especially at traffic lights. If walking at night, they are advised not to walk alone or take short cuts through deserted parks, to be aware of surroundings, to avoid unlit streets, not to wear headphones. Women are advised to make sure their phone is charged before they venture out, to tell someone where they are going. If they are meeting someone for the first time, they are advised to do so in a public place.

There are organisations in the UK, USA and India, for women who go running, who travel alone, and who live in a society where sexual attacks on women are commonplace (respectively). These organisations strongly recommend learning self defence techniques and they even organise and deliver this training. In the US, it common for women to carry mace (pepper spray).

There is nothing wrong with being aware that 'we' are our first responder if we are in difficulty or in a life threatening situation. No doubt self defence techniques would be invaluable.

However, it should not be the responsibility of young girls and women to make sure they are safe. Society should provide safety. Society and all of its structures, law enforcement agencies, judiciary system, government bodies, legislation, schools, colleges, workplaces, the media, all have a major responsibility in shaping the culture of our society. Societal

values, morals, attitudes and behaviours stem from these institutions as much today as they did when the Catholic church locked fallen women into Magdelene laundries.

Every agency, sector and structure has a duty to promote and uphold gender equality and to show zero tolerance for any actions that degrade, insult, threaten or harm women.

Clearly the current structures and attitudes are failing women. The lens through which key decision makers, law makers and indeed town planners look is gender biased. We need a review of the delicate nuances in our society that allow women to be degraded, humiliated, harassed, touched, attacked, raped and murdered.

The Government have announced that a Strategy to tackle violence against women will be published this March 2022. There is much to be reviewed because clearly there is a toxicity, a bias, an ignorance, that forms an impenetrable barrier to gender equality in our society.

Ireland has the highest level of claimed sexual harassment in Europe according to a WIN World Survey (2019) ranking 40 countries on gender equality, sexual harassment and violence. 32% of Irish women between the ages of 18 and 34 said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the last 12 months. Of all the 40 countries surveyed, Mexico ranked first, followed by Ireland.

The same survey revealed that only 17% of Irish people believe that social attitudes and behaviours treat men and women equally.

We have come a long way since the 19th Century thanks to our female predecessors but we still have a lot of work to do on the very fabric of our society. It is within this fabric that we live, work, interact, forge friendships, relationships and rear children. How we relate to each other is shaped by the values that are interwoven into this fabric. We need to unravel, redesign and rebuild much of this fabric to provide the foundation **for a safe society, based on gender equality and a complete absence of misogyny.**

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