



BRENDA POWER

Sarah's death shows us this is still a man's world

THE violent death of Sarah Montgomery, a pregnant mother of two young children, in Co. Down at the weekend makes her the latest victim in an alarming spate of femicide in the North in recent years.

In the space of just six weeks, last autumn, four women were murdered in the Six Counties, and last year alone, seven women died violently in the North. In the five years up to January last, 37 women were murdered in the Republic. But in the same period, there were 25 women murdered in the North, with a population approximately one-third that of the south.

Our figure of 37 is still obscenely high, of course, but on a pro-rata basis you would expect the North's figure to be in the low teens. Yet, statistically, Northern Ireland is second only to Romania in the table of the most dangerous places for women in Europe. What is going on there?

Aggression

At least in part, it seems, the high rate of femicide and domestic abuse in the North may be due to the fact that it is a post-conflict society, as such societies are known to experience increased levels of violence against women and children. But 'Post-conflict for whom?' was the question posed by Monica McWilliams, co-founder of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, at a debate in Georgetown University two years ago.

Research indicates that gender-based violence and sexual offences rose dramatically in the North in the years after the Good Friday Agreement. Violent tensions weaken relations between society and the state, and that puts the vulnerable at more risk of harm when people feel all norms and boundaries are frayed.

And then there's the more obvious consequence of the end of a violent conflict. As one British study put it, when 'hyper-masculinised and traumatised male combatants leave the battlefield' – be that physically or metaphorically – 'their homes become new stages for violence'. In other

CAN I be a tad unkind about Lauren Sánchez's wedding dress – you know, the one that probably cost more than your house? 'The Dress' is usually the focal point of any wedding; not even the groom has seen it, it's the day's big reveal, it's the first thing you're asked about when you've been to a wedding (although I have yet to meet a man who can answer that question with anything other than: 'It was white.') And for her marriage to Jeff Bezos, in Venice last week, Lauren had every top designer in the world at her beck and call, and she went for... a carbon copy of the dress Sophia Loren wore to marry Cary Grant in the 1946 movie Houseboat. For a start, it smacked of a cheap knock-off and, secondly, unless you look like Sophia Loren, and your groom looks like Cary Grant, inviting that comparison was a dumb move.

What a Cary on: Lauren Sánchez and Jeff Bezos on their big day



words, all that aggression and rage once vented upon the enemy finds a convenient new outlet within the family.

But there's little doubt misogyny is on the rise across the globe in recent years. Just look at the treatment of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and yet the UN continues to engage with that shower of medieval savages as if they were a legitimate government. They've been given a seat at UN climate change conferences, for example, and last July the Taliban was invited to a UN forum in Qatar to progress the country's 'integration' into the international community.

Now imagine if South Africa, in the worst days of apartheid, had introduced a law stating that black people had to be covered

head-to-toe in public, could not be educated, could not leave their homes without a white 'owner' accompanying them, couldn't be attended by a black midwife, couldn't play sports, and could face prosecution if their voices were heard outside of their houses. Would the world really have been working to 'integrate' and cosy up to them, or would the toughest possible sanctions and global opprobrium have rained down on the country's regime?

Shortly after a woman was beaten to death by Tehran's 'morality police' for showing a scrap of hair under her hijab, in 2022, our President wrote a fawning letter, purportedly on our behalf, wishing Iran's new leader all the best 'in your endeavours'.

So why is gender-apartheid, as practised in so many states including Iran and Saudi Arabia, acceptable to the male-dominated political sphere when racial apartheid is totally taboo? Why is 'blackface' practically a criminal offence, but 'womanface' – or highly sexualised and mocking 'drag' – considered entertainment? Why are women increasingly at risk from male violence and oppression in these supposedly enlightened and progressive times?

Because it's not just in those misogynistic theocracies that our rights, our liberties and our very lives are in danger. In its annual report last week, Women's Aid reported that it had received over 41,000 reports of domestic violence in Ireland last year, the

highest ever in its 50-year history. And while that increase may be due to the fact that more women are speaking out and coming forward, and the shame and stigma of 'intimate partner violence' is slowly being shifted onto the shoulders of the perpetrators where it belongs, that's almost certainly still just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to women and children being victimised by the men in their lives.

Partners and ex-partners are still the biggest single threat to women – as former State pathologist Marie Cassidy put it, it's the man in the bed, not the bogeyman hiding under it, that we need to worry about – but murders like that of Ashling Murphy, or the attacks on Alanna Quinn Idris and Natasha O'Brien, show that random male strangers are also a danger.

Vulnerable

And yet our sex-based rights and safe places are under attack from so-called liberals – we're bigots and 'transphobes' if we're not delighted to accept men in dresses, who identify as women, into our changing rooms, sports, toilets and refuges.

For some reason, these males are particularly keen to access places where females are vulnerable. In 2023, a homeless woman was savagely assaulted by a trans-identified male in an all-women's shelter in Rathmines, Dublin. When the case came to court, it emerged that 'she' was already serving a sentence for a violent crime... in the Dóchas women's prison.

Male violence is not a confected threat, it's a reality that women live with every day. It comes from strangers as well as partners, but its perpetrators are simply not being punished firmly enough by the courts, or judged harshly enough by society. The lost lives of women like Sarah Montgomery, and so many others too numerous to mention or recall, are testament to that.

God preserve us from Meghan

GIVEN the level of interest in Meghan Markle's 'home-made' raspberry jam on her 'As Ever' website, I don't suppose anybody really believed she was picking the raspberries, weighing the sugar and boiling up the fruit herself in her own kitchen.

A splash of juice would ruin her lovely cashmeres, and she'd be worn out calling around the neighbours collecting old jam jars to

recycle, like the rest of us amateur jam-makers. Yet if I'd paid almost €8 for a jar of her 'raspberry spread', over twice the price of a top-quality alternative, I'd be miffed to discover it was made in a factory in Illinois, 3,200km from her Californian idyll.

Meghan, right, insists it's 'inspired' by her own recipe: basically fruit, sugar and pectin. Just like every raspberry jam ever made, then – talk about fools and their money.



Number's up for lottery boss

WRITING here last week about that big EuroMillions lottery win, I told how a friend had pranked his family by producing a fake winning ticket and conning them into thinking they'd hit the jackpot. Well, it looks like the Norwegian lottery played the same trick on several thousand punters last week, and they didn't find it funny, either. Apparently, a prize fund that should have been divided by 100 was instead multiplied by

100, so players got texts telling them they'd won 'life-changing' sums of up to €138,000, when it should have been €1.38. Many had begun celebrating, and planning holidays and home improvements, when the error was revealed, but only one person actually gave up their job as a result – and no, it wasn't some poor drone who rang their boss and let rip. It was the CEO of the lottery company, who took the blame and resigned.