

Brenda Power

Hail the brave women shaming their attackers

Likes of O'Brien and Quinn Idris may help expose violence against women

Let them see what they've done." On the flight back to Washington after her husband's assassination, that was Jackie Kennedy's reason for refusing to clean herself up and change out of that famous pink suit. It was spattered with blood, powdered bone and brain tissue, but she insisted on stepping off the plane bearing her battle scars for the world's cameras to record.

It's a three-hour flight from Dallas to Washington and yet she sat there all the way in that suit, with the blood stiffening on her clothes, rather than wash and change to make herself presentable. She clearly took great pride in her glamour – it must have gone against every instinct to appear in public in such a degraded state. Hours earlier she'd been first lady, a fashion icon; now she was a widow, dishevelled, stained and dirty, a sight to horrify and repel rather than charm and attract. There must have been some, back in the day, who felt her display was hysterical and unseemly, unbecoming to someone of her status.

Not much has changed in the 60-odd years since. Women in the public eye are still expected to present themselves in a manner never required of men, and attractive women are under an added obligation to be decorative, as if to do otherwise were a defiance of their purpose. Sinéad O'Connor shaved her head to thwart industry executives who she feared prized her good looks above her music.

Youth and beauty, for all the strides we've made, are still considered a woman's most valuable capital; old and ugly are the insults most often flung at contrary or controversial females to put them in their proper place.

An Irish Times letter writer last week described how her 81-year-old mother confronted a man on Sandycove beach for breaching a ban on dogs in the bathing area, as

he had two large hounds roaming free. His response was to put a heavy chain lead around the elderly woman's neck and tell her she was the only dog on the beach.

The most striking image of the past week, for me, was the picture of Alanna Quinn Idris on her way to court to confront one of the thugs who blinded her in an unprovoked attack four years ago. She is an exceptionally beautiful young woman and, with the wind lifting her curls into a black halo, she looked like an ancient warrior goddess, striding into the criminal courts in Dublin in pursuit of justice. But her beauty was not being deployed for the male gaze or admiration; instead, she was deliberately subverting convention by

● Coming soon after band member Mo Chara's court appearance in London on a terrorism charge, Kneecap's performance in Fairview Park this month was always going to be a big event. And so it proved: the rappers attracted their biggest crowd for a solo gig, playing to a capacity audience of 8,000 on home turf in Dublin. The controversy, which included the UK prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, saying he didn't believe they should have been in yesterday's Glastonbury line-up, almost certainly attracted supporters for whom the band's music was a secondary consideration to their politics. Mo Chara, real name Liam Óg Ó hAinmáidh, is accused of displaying a jihadist flag at a London show in November.

Also last weekend, a performer who has attracted very little controversy, been denounced by no world leaders, taken no stance, fashionable or otherwise, on the Gazan conflict and engaged in no divisive rhetoric, played in Dublin. Zach Bryan, of whom most people of my generation had never heard before his Irish appearances, played three shows in another park in the



capital. Each night, the country-pop star, who sings of love, loss, longing, drinking beer and talking to his dead grandpa, drew a crowd of more than 60,000 people, evenly gender balanced and mostly twentysomethings, or almost 200,000 Irish fans over his Phoenix Park run.

That's enough to fill Croke Park almost three times over, whereas a crowd of 8,000 at a Cavan-Monaghan Gaelic football match on a wet Sunday in April last year was considered paltry. Could it be that some people like their music to come without a side-order of political hectoring and a compulsory serving of performative virtue-signalling? Who'd have thought it?

displaying, to horrify, and even repel us, the evidence of her injuries. And it is shocking to see: her dead eye, a white orb in her lovely face, challenging, defiant, uncompromising.

The author Salman Rushdie also lost an eye, in a stabbing attack provoked by the *Satanic Verses* fatwa during a speaking event in New York in 2022. He wrote a memoir, *Knife*, in which he reflected deeply on the incident and laid bare the chilling detail of the injury. His eye, he said, was left dangling on his cheek "like a soft-boiled egg", and the lids are now stitched closed. But in public, he covers his wound with a darkened spectacle lens or an eye patch. By contrast, Quinn Idris offers her attackers no reprieve, and her decision to attend court without covering her ruined eye was a statement of astonishing power: let them see what they've done.

By coincidence, another defiant sufferer of male violence, Natasha O'Brien was also back in the news last week, with an RTE documentary charting her emergence from victim of a brutal, random street attack to campaigner against gender-based violence. I suspect that by being beautiful women, way above the level of the scrawny, cowardly thugs who attacked them, O'Brien and Quinn Idris

somehow inflamed those inadequate men into trying to destroy their looks. Cathal Crotty, a soldier, held O'Brien by the hair and punched her repeatedly in the face, breaking her nose, after she challenged him for taunting a gay man on a night out. Quinn Idris had previously been harassed by Jack Cummins, who last week admitted procuring the attack in which she was struck in the face with the saddle of an e-scooter.

Stigma, or shame, was cited last week by Sarah Benson, the Women's Aid boss, to explain the reluctance of women to admit to being victims of domestic abuse. "Persisting social attitudes to domestic violence," she said, "prevent women from coming forward." Last year, however, Women's Aid received the highest number of disclosures of domestic violence in its 50-year history. More than 41,000 women reported abuse by a partner or former partner, up 17 per cent on 2023.

Is it really the case that more women are being assaulted now than, say, during Covid, when UN Women described the global spike in domestic violence as a "shadow pandemic"? Or is it just possible that, inspired by women like Quinn Idris and O'Brien, who are placing the shame where it belongs, more victims are emboldened to come forward, stand up to their abusers and let the world see what they've done?

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Quinn Idris at court without covering her ruined eye was a statement of power



