

# wkend

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Photo: Cathal Noonan

## State of the nation

Our columnists reflect on International Women's Day

# Designing women



**T**he day before Paris Fashion Week began at the end of February, a jury in New York convicted film producer Harvey Weinstein of felony sex crime and rape. The next day at the Christian Dior show, a flickering sign in neon green reading 'consent' was displayed as the guest arrived at the show space.

Since 2017, the fashion industry has been grappling with its purpose amidst allegations against men in power, as they emerged from the woodwork of the film, music, and fashion industries louder than ever before.

How do designers represent women at a time when ongoing injustices against them have finally reached a fever pitch? With the rise of movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp, hypersexualisation and objectification — tactics of fashion past — were by and large replaced with more mindful approaches to dressing. Things went from a glamour-filled era to clothes that acted as a balm to the tumult of the times.

Moreover, in the 2010s, from the glut of content on Instagram to the proliferation of the number of designers and information at our

How do designers represent women at a time when ongoing injustices against them have reached fever pitch? **Paul McLauchlan** explores the catwalk in the #MeToo era

disposal, it became abundantly apparent that there is no one woman in the minds of fashion designers.

On the autumn/winter 2020 runways which concluded recently, there were no conclusions. Some thought about sustainability, others thought about sex, some thought about the 1920s, others thought about fringe, the colour silver and big shoulders. From the big thinkers to the simple propositions, in all her glory and iterations, one had to ask — did we

just catch a glimpse of the modern woman? Again, again, and again and again.

While fashion designers can often paint depictions of an 'elusive' woman, one unfamiliar to most in the audience, with lofty concepts and an unreachable mien, the upcoming autumn/winter 2020 season designed a wardrobe that was as varied as women's lives are today. From the street to the office — via a pitstop in the bedroom — and an evening gala, today's fashion is very much about every woman in the room.

"I was thinking about the tension between refinement and rebellion," said Victoria Beckham at her London Fashion Week catwalk show in February.

"I was inspired by different ideas of women — different characters, different moments, and different attitudes — but with no restrictions. The overriding sentiment that we don't have to follow the rules.

"We can follow our instincts, be spirited."

Intentional or not, London designers with their (mostly) limited budgets and fearless creativity collectively encapsulated something about women today.

**The mother and daughter designers behind Bernadette: "Femininity for us is feeling strong in your body."**

Fashion for everyone is as elusive a concept as the so-called 'woman' central to designers' mood boards. Yet, unfurling on these runways, here she was. And her sister. And her best friend, and girlfriend. And her aunt. And her mother. The many faces of femininity, refracted in every shape and form possible, were everywhere.

How does one shop for the multiplicities of women's wardrobe needs? Natalie Kingham, fashion & buying director at MATCHES-FASHION.com devises a rubric to encompass the many faces of femininity.

"Approaching each season we look to our six muses; The Fashion Pioneer, The Warrior, The Free Spirit, The Curator, The Romantic, and The Purist," she said. "For example, The Purist opts for minimalist style with a sleek, functional edge, whereas the Fashion Pioneer looks to more directional designers and are very often the early adopters of new trends."

You might find The Purist in Beckham's designs, where the so-called woman wears feminine skirt-suits with abbreviated hemlines, heritage checks in manipulated patterns, streamlined dresses in dark colours cut with a room for swishy elegance, and trousers cropped above the ankle. Simple but effective, her vision was convincing. Midi-lengths are as commonplace as keyboards in offices but those shorter lengths were, though hardly an emancipating concept, a refreshing departure from the length that defined the 2010s.

She's not the only one with smartness and modesty in mind.

Could Roksanda's modernist wardrobe fantasy of tactile colour-blocked concoctions and modular tailoring, intercut with evening looks inspired by the abstract expressionist woman artist Lee Krasner, in fluoro shades or more rich hues like terracotta and sage, be the modern woman?

Or was it the more playful but nonetheless sophisticated one we saw at Emilia Wickstead, a designer popular amongst Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle. Inspired by Irish-American art director Cedric Gibbons's fond-

ness for Art Deco and Art Moderne, it manifested itself in 'dancing length' dresses in lowered necklines, jumpsuits with sculptural drapery, and amplified sleeves atop streamlined silhouettes. This woman evokes a century-old properness, but somehow felt right for today.

Was the answer to contemporary femininity in the revisionist explorations of historical fashion? 100 years later, the 1920s were on full display in the London collections. Perhaps borrowing from the past is the way forward, building on pre-existing codes to shift the narrative of women's fashion and their wardrobe tastes forward.

The beautiful black and white photography of Cecil Beaton informed Erdem's procession of 1920s-leaning dames. Their silver frocks drip with pearls, their necks adorned with even more pearls. Their dresses decorated like cakes, as if frosted with lace. Their trousers are menswear-inspired and roomy, but spotted with pearls. Their coats provide a practical, protective shell, but fashionably, in check patterns, neon quilting, geometric prints in green and pink.

"Femininity for us is feeling strong in your body and being confident of your uniqueness," said Charlotte de Geyter, co-founder of Belgian label Bernadette (named after her mother and fellow co-founder), available at Brown Thomas.

Prized for its ultra-feminine, glamorous appeal, with body-framing couture silhouettes adapted for the modern woman, de Geyter said: "We are proud of our

timeless femininity and want to enhance this through our feminine cuts, but always remain comfortable. There needs to remain an ease to our pieces so she can throw it on and leave the house for her own next appointment in an instant."

While some are comfortable with noble ideas of sophisticated women who like to dress up, they are juxtaposed with ideas around the body, of sensuality and sexuality, even sex. In the wake of #MeToo, many designers were sceptical to uphold the age-old adage of 'sex sells'. Can sex sell in an era where the conversation around it is defined by injustice and crime?

The answer is yes — when the subject matter is handled carefully.

On the catwalks, there was plenty of suggestive content. Richard Quinn, wonderboy based in South London, with Irish parents, threw blown-out floral dresses into the mix as if the woman was plucked from the gardens of Buckingham Palace. But they were worn with latex bodysuits, often covering the model's faces. A mischievous move.

Christopher Kane thought about temptation too.

His story, literally, could be traced back to the beginning of time. He was thinking about the 'love triangle' between Adam, Eve, and the serpent. From clear crystal mesh playing with modest, cheeky cutouts and lingerie-inspired lace detailing hither and thither, some clothes delight in wearing provocation firmly on your sleeve.

Kinky prerogatives were also in mind at new label Charlotte Knowles, fronted by recent graduates Charlotte Knowles and Alexandre Arsenault. Inspired by lingerie, their trussed-up, corseted models have a rebellious 90s attitude and a confident sexiness that was almost forgotten about in the wake of #MeToo.

For every perverse showing, there was a tailored suit, a modest jumpsuit, or parachute-style coat in the mix. In essence, there is no one woman.

"What is exciting about the past few seasons is that we can see the dress code rules have changed, and there is more flexibility and room to style in different ways," said Kingham. "For example The Curator is wearing chunky boots with a tulle Molly Goddard dress and The Warrior has taken a more empowered approach to power dressing with the likes of new brand DUNCAN injecting traditional tailoring with punk-inspired and feminine accents.

"We've also seen our more Romantic customer style an elegant dress with a pair of flats for a black-tie event."

The conclusion? There is none. For once, there is something for everyone in the audience, a testament to the heartfelt commitment contemporary designers have to tend to the wardrobe needs of modern women. These ideas will, by and large, filter down to the high street in months to come, while the more challenging silhouettes might take years. Nevertheless, the fashion of tomorrow is your choice. A revolutionary concept for women.



Emilia Wickstead explored the playful, sophisticated woman on the catwalk at London Fashion Week.

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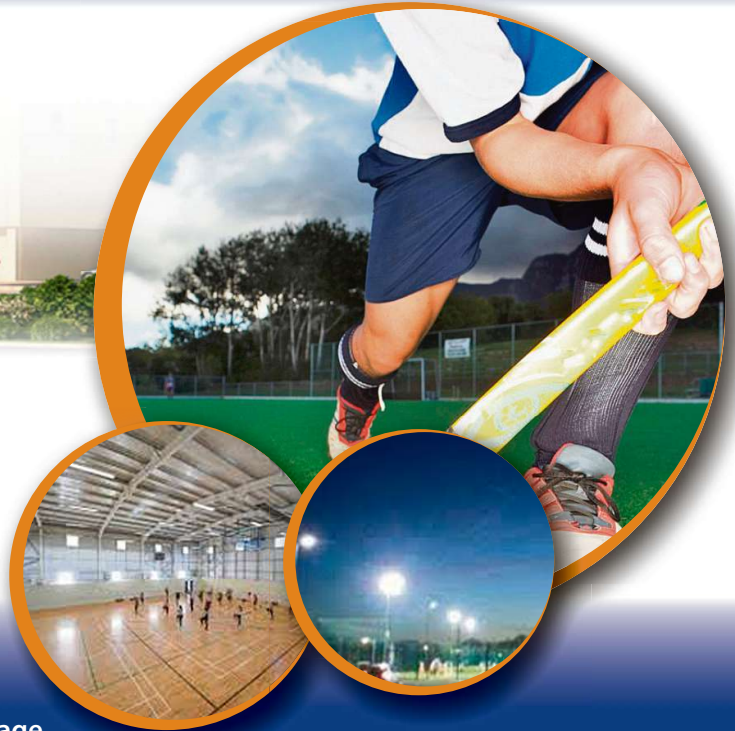
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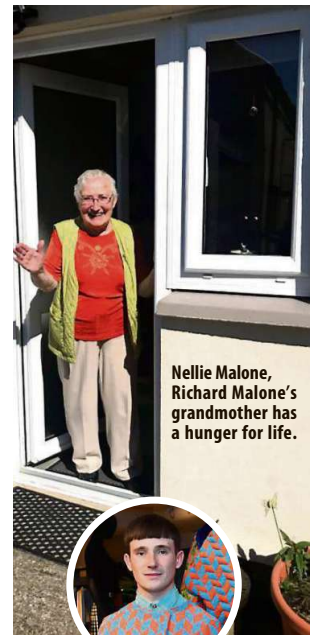
# The woman who inspired me



Emma Fraser and Aislinn Lawlor who run Not Another Agency. They have been lauded by photographer Eoin Greally. Darren Kennedy, inset below, praises his mother, Valerie.



Brendan Courtney with his mother, Nuala.



Nellie Malone, Richard Malone's grandmother has a hunger for life.

In their words, this International Women's Day, six Irish men share the stories of the women that inspire them the most from mothers to grandmothers, wives, children, and mentors

**RICHARD MALONE  
FASHION DESIGNER**

"The inspiring woman I've chosen to write about is my late grandmother, Nellie Malone. There are a thousand reasons why you could choose Nellie, it could make any number of books or volumes. One of the most inspiring things was her hunger for life and endless curiosity. Nellie didn't receive any formal education and learned 'on the job' as she would say. She taught me that there is so much to be cherished and celebrated regardless of your background or where you are from, everyone has a point of view and a vision that deserves respect. It's been a lesson I've kept with me all through my education and career thus far, as one of the only or at most very few working-class creatives working in this industry and studying [at Central Saint Martins in London]. It's an amazing thing when someone passes away and you find it hard to be sad because you know they lived every day to its fullest capacity and there

wasn't a word left unsaid."

**EIOLIN GREALLY  
PHOTOGRAPHER**

"I'm fortunate enough that there have been a plethora of amazing women in my life that I could write this piece about. Two people who immediately sprung to mind were Emma Fraser and Aislinn Lawlor who co-own and run Not Another Agency, one of Ireland's leading modelling/creative agencies. Since Not Another Agency started, Aislinn and Emma have transformed it into a creative hub for talent to thrive in, launching careers for the people they take under their wings. Through the agency, they have pushed figures of Irish fashion to amazing places with some of their models being placed in some of the world's largest agencies as well as working with fashion powerhouses like Vetements, Vogue Paris and most recently, Missoni. These two women have shown me how to work, value myself and trust my creative vision in an industry that people easily get lost in. They disprove the stereotypes that women who are successful in fashion have to get there by being overbearing or mean because they have shown me, and I'm sure so many others that, as well as being powerful, it is always also possible to be decent."

**SEAN RAINBIRD  
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL  
GALLERY OF IRELAND**

"Nearly 40 years in the visual arts, I have been working closely with women throughout my professional life. A Tate colleague, Catherine, shared a birthday with me, which was a warming coincidence. She helped me develop a critical appreciation of contemporary art, where I had much to learn. Support at home — I have been commuting between countries for 13 years now — means that Mieke, my wife, puts in more rounds of support than is reasonable for anyone to expect. Our daughter, Anna, is at college. My greatest hope is that some of the visible and invisible bars on women progressing, including in the workplace, will be less her experience than it still is for many women. I wish her to chart her path because of who she wants to become, and for no other reason."

**DARREN KENNEDY  
TELEVISION HOST  
& ENTREPRENEUR**

"My mother, Valerie, has been a huge inspiration for me and there's a lot of reasons why but I

have to say the main one is something I realised as I've gotten older: it's what mothers, and parents in general, do for us. My mother has always made sacrifices in everything she's ever done for us, she always puts everyone else before herself — even now, with helping my sister who has three kids. She's willing to put her needs secondary. When I was coming out, it was when I was a teenager, at a time when my parents probably had no interaction with gay people. It felt like I was dropping a bomb on our family but watching how she adapted to that, and no matter what she was going through, she always made sure I was okay."

**COLIN BURKE  
FASHION DESIGNER**

"My late grandmother, Maureen continues to inspire me and my work. From Enniscrone, Co. Sligo, she moved to Galway in her twenties where she became one of Ireland's youngest fashion buyers at the time. Throughout her life, she always had a keen interest in design, fashion, and retail. I've many fond memories of conversations we shared in her kitchen at

Corrib Terrace in Galway City. In her later years, I began to record these conversations to feed my research for projects at the National College of Art & Design where I was studying fashion. When she passed away in March 2016, I decided to dedicate my final year degree collection to her. Entitled 'Born in 32', the collection saw me become Student Designer of the Year and I was later acknowledged as 'One to Watch' by Fashion Director at Brown Thomas, Shelly Corkery. Today my work continues to pay homage to her."

**BRENDAN COURTNEY  
BROADCASTER &  
FASHION DESIGNER**

"Nuala Courtney, my mother, is my greatest style influence and it always surprises me (and her) when people ask us if I dress her when she is my fashion alma mater — I've learned everything from her. Although ironically she gets a new suite of Lennon Courtney each season, which she selects, I might add. As a teen, I learned the power of your personal appearance from my mother: she wore Gucci when nobody could pronounce it and her style is irreverently unapologetic. Plus, she knew how to get attention, an intoxicating recipe of fabulousness."