

# ***Mother Jones***

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## **Mass Murderers and Women: What we're still not getting about Virginia Tech evidence shows that many mass murderers begin and end their rampages with violence against women. With over 30 dead in Virginia, can we finally begin to take the issue seriously?**

By James Ridgeway, [MotherJones.com](http://MotherJones.com)

Of all the lessons contained in the horror at Virginia Tech, the one least likely to be learned has to do with the deadly danger posed by the dismissive way we still view violence against women.

The first person killed by Cho Seung-Ho, a freshman named Emily Hilscher, was initially rumored to be Cho's current or former girlfriend – the subject of his obsession or jealous rage. It now appears that she never had a relationship with Cho, but the rumors were spread quickly, especially by blogs and by the international tabloid press. The UK's Daily Mail headlined the "Massacre Gunman's Deadly Infatuation with Emily," while Australia's Daily Telegraph published a photo of a smiling Hilscher with the line "THIS is the face of the girl who may have sparked the worst school shooting in US history." (The page is still up.) Some accounts stooped to suggesting, with zero evidence, that the victim had jilted Cho, cheated on him, or led him on.

More significantly, local police and university administrators appear to have initially bought this motive, and acted accordingly. In the two hours between the murders of Hilscher and her dorm neighbor Ryan Clark, and Cho's mass killings at another university building, they chose not to cancel classes or lock down the campus. (They did choose to do so, however, in August 2006, when a man shot a security guard and a sheriff's deputy and escaped from a hospital two miles away.) Virginia Tech President Charles Steger said authorities believed the first shooting was a "domestic dispute" and thought the gunman had fled the campus, so "We had no reason to suspect any other incident was going to occur." The assumption, apparently, is that men who kill their cheating girlfriends are criminals, but they are not crazy, not psychopaths, and not a danger to anyone other than the woman in question. (Or, as one reader commented at Feministe sarcastically, "Like killing your girlfriend is no big deal.")

In fact, these attitudes ignore past evidence of both "domestic disputes" and a more generalized misogyny as motives in mass killings. Multiple murders in homes and workplaces often begin with a man killing his wife or girlfriend. Mark Barton, who in 1999 shot nine

people in an Atlanta office building, began the day by bludgeoning to death his children and his wife; six years earlier he had been a suspect in the death of his first wife and her mother, who were also beaten to death. In another high-profile case, the December 1989 mass shooting at Montreal's Ecole Polytechnique, Marc Lepine was after women, whom he hated, and had a list of feminists he wanted to kill. He murdered four men and 14 women, and wounded 10 more women. In September 2006, Duane Roger Morrison walked into Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colo., and took six female students hostage, killing one. And last October, Charles Carl Roberts IV took over an Amish schoolhouse, let the boys go, and killed five girls.

One warning sign in such cases is a history of stalking and harassment of women. At Virginia Tech, in September 2005, poet Nikki Giovanni had Cho removed from her class at Virginia Tech after female students complained that he was using his cell phone to take pictures of their legs underneath the desks; some refused to come to class while Cho was there. In November and December of that year, two female students reported receiving threatening messages from Cho, and one said he was stalking her. But charges were never filed, and police and university officials didn't seem especially worried about the women. Yet, as Arlen Specter pointed out in comments on the VT shooting made during the Gonzalez hearings Thursday, Cho had been accused of a "crime against the state as well as against the students," and the local DA could have taken up the case.

According to the Stalking Resource Center, one million women are stalked in the U.S. every year. In two-thirds of the cases where a female victim asks for a police protective order, that order is violated. Earlier this month, Rebecca Griego, a researcher at the University of Washington, was murdered in her office by her ex-boyfriend after she had reported his threats to the university police and Seattle police, changed her phone number, moved out of her apartment, distributed photos and descriptions of her stalker, and sought an order for protection.

One third of female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner (as opposed to about 3 percent of male victims). Of these, 76 percent had been stalked by the partner in the year prior to their murder. Murder ranks second (after accidents) as the leading cause of death among young women. And if the Supreme Court and abortion opponents really want to protect the lives of fetuses, they might consider this: Murder is the number one cause of death of pregnant women in the United States.

At least there is some recognition of such statistics in legislation called the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, sponsored by Senators Kennedy and Gordon Smith. If passed (unlike earlier versions, which were blocked by House Republican leadership), this law would finally classify as hate crimes certain violent, criminal acts that are motivated by the victim's gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or disability.

"Whatever helped bring on the Virginia Tech shootings, it certainly wasn't guns." That's the point gun advocates are scrambling to make; if anything, they argue, the shootings prove that we need more gun access. And President Bush fell in behind them after visiting the memorial service at Virginia (a state that is historically Republican turf, lost in the last two years to a Democratic governor, Tim Kaine, and a Democratic senator, James Webb). Bush didn't get

into the gun control issue, saying it wasn't the time or place, but an aide made his position clear to reporters afterward. And Senator John McCain, whose imploding campaign has been seeking to recast him as a Bush lookalike, offered, "We have to look at what happened here, but it doesn't change my views on the second amendment except to make sure that these kinds of weapons don't fall into the hands of bad people."

Having been committed to a mental health facility for being a danger to himself and others presented no obstacle for Cho Seung-Hui, who bought one gun at a Blacksburg pawnshop and another-a Glock 9-at a Roanoke gun store.

Here's a bare-bones list of state gun rules.

- No limits on assault weapons
- State and federal criminal background checks
- No restrictions on concealed weapons-even snub nosed handguns
- Gun owners are held responsible for leaving weapons around children, but no safety lock requirements exist.
- Cities can't hold gun makers liable for gun violence.
- Can't give kids under 18 handguns or assault weapons, but kids can possess rifles and shotguns.
- Can't sell handguns to kids under 18, but any kid over 12 can buy shotguns, older rifles, and assault weapons, all without parental consent.
- You don't need a license to buy a handgun.
- There are no requirements that gun buyers register. The cops have no idea how many guns there are in the state.

Lax gun laws like these combined with precious little awareness of the role violence against women plays in psychopathic behavior have led to tragic results. Will they again?

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