

# Families shamed

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Often shunned by neighbours and vilified in the press, the relatives of convicted murderers and rapists serve their very own 'sentence'. Criminologist **Rachel Condry** has researched the impact on the mothers and wives of serious offenders, and asks why women in particular shoulder so much blame.

On 16 April this year, when Cho Seung-hui killed 32 people at Virginia Tech University in the USA, audiences across the globe watched in horror as the scale of his crime unfolded. Almost immediately the world's media were camped outside his family home and began to delve into every aspect of their lives. How had this quiet and respectable Korean immigrant family produced a son who was a mass murderer and a daughter who was a Princeton graduate? From the dry cleaners that they ran to the vegetable patches in their back garden, each and every detail of their lives was held up for examination. The family went into hiding, releasing a statement in which his sister expressed their grief and shock:

'We are so deeply sorry for the devastation my brother has caused. No words can express our sadness ... We are humbled by this darkness. We feel hopeless, helpless and lost. This is someone that I grew up with and loved. Now I feel like I didn't know this person ... We never could have envisioned that he was capable of so much violence. He has made the world weep. We are living a nightmare.'

I spent more than three years interviewing 32 relatives of offenders convicted of serious crimes such as murder, manslaughter, rape, and child sex offences. The emotions expressed by the Cho family would strongly resonate with the relatives I met who described how they were left traumatised, shocked and grieving and how their lives were forever changed the day they found out about the offence.

When Gill discovered her husband had committed paedophile offences she says she experienced overwhelming shock which manifested in physical symptoms: 'I felt half dead. It's like when you've got the worst dose of the flu but double-fold, it's like your limbs have got no weight but they feel dead heavy.' 'Debilitating' is how Anne described the impact of

finding out her 17 year old son had been arrested for rape. She was frightened to leave the house, and it took two years before she started to feel better. 'I'd lost my son as I knew him ... I'd lost his future.' Some relatives were so traumatised that they even contemplated suicide.

Relatives had to accommodate practical changes, often having to provide emotional and practical support to the offender and other relatives, responsibilities which fell disproportionately to women in the family. This support consumed considerable time and energy and included liaising with solicitors, dealing with the police during the investigation, attending court, fending off the media, and prison visiting.

The relatives I met spoke of feeling stigmatised and shamed. Bringing shame upon the family is a notion more commonly associated with Asian or Mediterranean cultures and closely bound extended families, but in my study I found that family shame was also a Western phenomenon. In the families I met, dishonour flowed from the actions of the offender, and the family's reputation was often irreversibly damaged.

## Kin contamination

This shame and stigma had its roots in what I call 'kin contamination' and 'kin culpability'. Relatives were seen as contaminated or somehow the same as the offender because of their close association or because of a genetic connection that could provoke very primitive ideas of bad blood. They felt doubly blamed, for imagined sins of omission – that they knew or should have known about the offending and failed to stop it – and for sins of commission – that some deed in the immediate or distant past might have caused or contributed to the offender's actions.

Often wives and mothers are held most responsible. Blaming mothers for problems in the family, from autism to schizophrenia, anorexia to juvenile delinquency, has a long history. One study analysed 125 articles written by mental health professionals in scholarly journals and found that mothers were blamed for 72 different kinds

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PA PHOTO/JACQUELYN MARTIN

Above: After the Virginia Tech killings in April 2007, the world's media focused its attention on Cho Seung Hui's family home

of problems in their offspring. Mothers spoke of their own horror that someone born of their body – 'my flesh and blood' – had committed such a heinous act. As Pauline, whose son was convicted of killing another man, said: 'You've carried him for nine months, he's part of you, isn't he?'

Wives, too, are often seen as the guardians of family morality, imbued with responsibility for keeping their husbands on the straight and narrow and seen to be somehow at fault when this fails. Primrose Shipman, the wife of the English doctor and serial killer Harold Shipman, was the subject of intense criticism and speculation about what she might have known. The perception that she herself was somehow culpable was tellingly illustrated by the fury that erupted over the decision to award her a widow's pension after her husband's death.

The consequences of blame could be severe, and many relatives reported friendships that ended, people crossing the street to avoid engaging in conversation, and even direct verbal abuse and physical attack. Examples included a wife of a sex offender who had all the windows in her house broken, a mother who was spat at in the street, and a wife who was taunted by people in her local area: 'you murderer's wife'.

### Family loyalty

Those relatives that chose to support the offender thought that this in itself elicited blame; was interpreted as implicitly condoning – or at least tolerating – the offence. They were keen to point out that this was not the case, that they could 'hate the sin but love the sinner' and stressed the importance of family loyalty and standing by their family when the going got tough.

When I published my book earlier this year it generated considerable media interest, including newspaper and magazine articles and interviews

on Radio 4 and the BBC World Service. There seemed to be a genuine interest in hearing the stories of these relatives, stories that tend to be hidden in our dialogue about crime and its consequences, and an engagement with the idea that shame and blame can be transmitted through kin ties and family members deemed responsible for each other's actions.

It is this idea that I am taking forward and considering in a different context in my next project. I am now in the early stages of research looking at parenting and youth justice – how the youth justice system works with parents in the UK, and the experiences of parents and youth justice workers on the ground. I am interested in the criminal justice response to parents of young offenders – including the use of compulsory measures such as parenting orders – but also want to place the findings of the research in the context of legal and sociological debates about the state regulation of family life and family responsibilities, and 'intensive parenting' and the increasing and expanding expectations of parents in contemporary society. ■



### Dr Rachel Condry



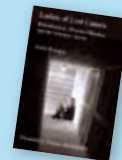
is a research fellow in the Law department at LSE. Her book, *Families Shamed: the consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders*, is published by Willan (2007).

Dr Condry recently took part in the British Society of Criminology annual conference along with LSE colleagues. The conference, which was hosted by LSE's Mannheim Centre for Criminology, debated crime and justice in an age of global insecurity. For more information on the Mannheim Centre, see [www.lse.ac.uk/mannheim](http://www.lse.ac.uk/mannheim)

### The Campaign for LSE

## Focus on philanthropy Griffins Society

In September, LSE celebrated its innovative partnership with the Griffins Society and the ongoing impact of their work at an event in the Shaw Library on campus. Helena Kennedy QC and Howard Davies spoke at the event, which also marked the launch of *Ladies of Lost Causes: rehabilitation, women offenders and the voluntary sector*, a new book by LSE academic Judith Rumgay, which details the history of the Griffins Society and its achievements.



Formed in 1966, the Griffins Society is a voluntary organisation that works to support women through the criminal justice system. Since 2001 it has supported a visiting research fellowship programme at LSE. The fellowship is unique in that it enables practitioners to take time out to study a particular aspect of the circumstances or treatment of women offenders with academic support and supervision provided by the School.

The programme is making a real practical impact on the work of policy makers and senior practitioners. As a result of this success, LSE is delighted that the Society has recently made a commitment to the future of the partnership, based in the Mannheim Centre for Criminology from 2007.

Following the findings and recommendations of the Centre's 2007 fellow Louise Clark, HM Prison Service has awarded further funding to develop a prison based information and support network for imprisoned street sex workers, and to deliver training to improve prison staff awareness of this group's resettlement needs.

Louise Clark said: 'The opportunity to do fellowship research on this topic has enabled us to identify the relevant issues and what we need do about them. The commitment from the Griffins Society to develop fellows' research into reality reflects their dedication to influencing positive change in the world of criminal justice.'



Volunteers from the Griffins Society at the event