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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Why Aren't We Shocked?

By **BOB HERBERT**

"Who needs a brain when you have these?"

— message on an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt for young women

In the recent shootings at an Amish schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania and a large public high school in Colorado, the killers went out of their way to separate the girls from the boys, and then deliberately attacked only the girls.

Ten girls were shot and five killed at the Amish school. One girl was killed and a number of others were molested in the Colorado attack.

In the widespread coverage that followed these crimes, very little was made of the fact that only girls were targeted. Imagine if a gunman had gone into a school, separated the kids up on the basis of race or religion, and then shot only the black kids. Or only the white kids. Or only the Jews.

There would have been thunderous outrage. The country would have first recoiled in horror, and then mobilized in an effort to eradicate that kind of murderous bigotry. There would have been calls for action and reflection. And the attack would have been seen for what it really was: a hate crime.

None of that occurred because these were just girls, and we have become so accustomed to living in a society saturated with misogyny that violence against females is more or less to be expected. Stories about the rape, murder and mutilation of women and girls are staples of the news, as familiar to us as weather forecasts. The startling aspect of the Pennsylvania attack was that this terrible thing happened at a school in Amish country, not that it happened to girls.

The disrespectful, degrading, contemptuous treatment of women is so pervasive and so mainstream that it has just about lost its ability to shock. Guys at sporting events and other public venues have shown no qualms about raising an insistent chant to nearby women to show their breasts. An ad for a major long-distance telephone carrier shows three apparently naked women holding a billing statement from a competitor. The text asks, "When was the last time you got screwed?"

An ad for Clinique moisturizing lotion shows a woman's face with the lotion spattered across it to simulate the climactic shot of a porn video.

We have a problem. Staggering amounts of violence are unleashed on women every day, and there is no escaping the fact that in the most sensational stories, large segments of the population are titillated by that violence. We've been watching the sexualized image of the murdered 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey for 10

years. JonBenet is dead. Her mother is dead. And we're still watching the video of this poor child prancing in lipstick and high heels.

What have we learned since then? That there's big money to be made from thongs, spandex tops and sexy makeovers for little girls. In a misogynistic culture, it's never too early to drill into the minds of girls that what really matters is their appearance and their ability to please men sexually.

A girl or woman is sexually assaulted every couple of minutes or so in the U.S. The number of seriously battered wives and girlfriends is far beyond the ability of any agency to count. We're all implicated in this carnage because the relentless violence against women and girls is linked at its core to the wider society's casual willingness to dehumanize women and girls, to see them first and foremost as sexual vessels — objects — and never, ever as the equals of men.

"Once you dehumanize somebody, everything is possible," said Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of the women's advocacy group Equality Now.

That was never clearer than in some of the extreme forms of pornography that have spread like nuclear waste across mainstream America. Forget the embarrassed, inhibited raincoat crowd of the old days. Now Mr. Solid Citizen can come home, log on to this \$7 billion mega-industry and get his kicks watching real women being beaten and sexually assaulted on Web sites with names like "Ravished Bride" and "Rough Sex — Where Whores Get Owned."

Then, of course, there's gangsta rap, and the video games where the players themselves get to maul and molest women, the rise of pimp culture (the Academy Award-winning song this year was "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp"), and on and on.

You're deluded if you think this is all about fun and games. It's all part of a devastating continuum of misogyny that at its farthest extreme touches down in places like the one-room Amish schoolhouse in normally quiet Nickel Mines, Pa.

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