

Introduction

It was 4:00 a.m., and Theresa Kingsbury was driving south on Highway 687 from Danbury, Connecticut to Kingston, New York, a distance of about 100 miles. Alone in her Honda, she had \$5,000 cash, transferring it from one branch of her employer's ski shop to another. The highway was empty. Suddenly, two cars raced up behind her, forcing her onto the shoulder. A woman alone in a deserted location, she appeared an easy mark. The cars stopped and two men walked toward her car, one brandishing a hammer. She raised her loaded pistol to the window where they could easily see it. The men fled.

Peggy Landry, 64, was out one summer's evening with her girlfriends in a residential part of New Orleans. They'd enjoyed dinner and had just gotten into their car when Landry heard a man's voice threatening the driver. Suddenly he jammed a revolver into the open window against another friend's head, sitting beside her in the back seat. "This is a robbery! Give me all your jewelry and your money!" he shouted. As her friend pulled out her cash and pulled off her jewelry, Landry reached for her Smith & Wesson .38, grabbed her friend's arm to stop her, and planted the gun against the man's heart. "It was like a standoff at the O.K. Corral," recalls Landry. "He was waiting to see what I would do and I was waiting to see what he would do." Terrified, he took off.

For Carrmon Whitehead, a 33-year old nurse in Colorado City, Texas, a protection order against her ex-husband was proving worthless. Ordered to stay away from her and their three young children, he had already poured sugar in her gas tank, punctured her tires and cut her telephone lines. A friend encouraged her to get a gun and learn to use it. The next time he appeared at her door drunk and eager for another round of cat-and-mouse proved his last. Wearing her "little red nightgown", Whitehead raised a .357 Magnum, pointed it in his direction, (aiming carefully for the empty field behind him), and fired it for the first time. He hasn't bothered her since.

The muzzle of a gun was the only part of "No!" these men understood.

Do women *really* want to arm themselves for self-defense? Probably not. In an ideal world, women would never have to fear attack. But that's not the world we live in, whether home lies at the end of a silent country road or the 35th floor of a city high-rise.

None of us wants to become a victim. Yet when women decide to fight back, and when that choice involves acquiring a firearm, they often face considerable social disapproval, both privately and publicly. Even if her friends and family support her choice, politicians, journalists, feminists and gun-control advocates -- who may have

never even touched or fired a gun – are eager to dissuade her. Those who most consistently favor women arming themselves for self-defense are police officers and private investigators (usually former police), who understand criminal behavior and have seen firsthand its devastating physical and psychological effects, short and long-term.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, fighting terrorism has dominated the imagination, and manpower, of local, state, regional and federal law enforcement, arguably placing women at greater risk as police forces are spread more thinly, their attention focused on issues of national security – not domestic violence, rape or burglary. No matter how distasteful or frightening to consider, creating and practicing an effective form of self-defense may now be more crucial than ever for women.

Depending where you live and what social circles you move in, mentioning your interest in guns, or in acquiring one, is a guaranteed conversation-stopper. It can quickly separate a woman from her family, friends, neighbors and colleagues, marking her as....

As *what* exactly? Paranoid? Vengeful? Out of control? Powerful? Independent?

Men and women alike are often deeply ambivalent about a woman who owns a gun and knows how to use it. In a culture where women inject their brows with deadly bacteria to paralyze their facial muscles, relaxing wrinkles that show emotion, an armed, angry female is a deeply unsettling vision.

Especially for women, there are few decisions more personal, and perhaps more privately political, than buying a firearm.

It's not the kind of purchase you're likely to discuss casually with your tennis partner or your cubicle-mate. In the 17 states that don't allow citizens to carry concealed weapons, many women have likely only seen guns safely holstered on policeman's belt or waved about on a television show. Ignorant of firearms, she may well find the subject frightening, even repellent. Few women considering buying a gun, especially one for self-protection, would be foolish enough to jeopardize her friendships or professional reputation by talking it over with anyone she doesn't know well; if she lives in one of the nation's concealed-carry states, she can more likely turn to someone whose home contains a firearm and who has some working familiarity with how to buy, own and store one.

It's a decision, then, women most often make, and live with, in secret. Yet, ironically, this crucial decision is still most often made with no female insights, only with male advice. No matter how uninformed a particular man's opinions may be, they nonetheless often carry great weight. Gun expertise becomes a closed loop, as many women – assuming other women don't know the subject – turn to men, some of whom may be gun-shy or clueless, for advice and guidance.

Once they cross the line into gun ownership, however, some women end up devoted to guns in a way they would once have considered unimaginable. Their homes may contain a veritable arsenal. One 45-year-old woman I met at a Springfield, MA gun show said she had burst into tears of fear and anxiety the first time a boyfriend showed her his gun. Now, a decade later, when asked how many guns she owns, she lolled her head back onto her current boyfriend's shoulder.

“Honey, how many guns do we have?”
“About 100.”

Why would any woman want to own a gun, or several? Women, social norms still insist, are primarily nurturers and pacifiers, most interested in compromise, conflict resolution and cooperation. Pointing the barrel of a .38 or .357 Magnum or .380 shotgun at another human being – or a paper target or a deer or moose or pheasant -- isn't a dream we're encouraged to share. For many people, the words “women” and “guns” rest uneasily in the same sentence.

Like men, women buy guns for many different reasons: to hunt, to compete, to shoot socially, to protect themselves or their children. There is no “typical” female gun owner. Female gun-owners live in Manhattan, New York and Manhattan, Kansas. They may own small-caliber pistols like a .22 or .25 or a shotgun, rifle or large semi-automatic pistol such as a .357 or .45. – or several of each. If a woman's father or male relatives, or (more rarely) her mother and grandmother, lawfully and responsibly owned and used guns, she likely carries no fear of them. They're as unremarkable and familiar a part of the household inventory as a hairdryer or dishwasher.

And women grow up with, and feel daily, the very real fear of assault -- according to Department of Justice statistics, **three of four American women over the age of 12 will be victims of crime at least once in their lives**. An educated, urban, middle-class professional, who has always lived in “good” neighborhoods, who once thought crime would always remain safely distant from my own life, I've become a crime victim four times. I never pursued arrest or prosecution, impossible in three of the events, but the sense of violation and impotence it left with me is indelible.

More than a third of women will be violently assaulted, raped or robbed in their lifetimes.

By the time they think about buying a gun for self-defense, women are simply worn thin by fear, fed up of low-level, life-long anxiety about what to wear, when to travel, what public transit, pedestrian or vehicular routes to take. Who wants to spend one's life calculating who is safe to speak to and smile at --- and who we should walk away from briskly? Yet women do. We rarely discuss it, so automatic is the impulse to turn away, to back down, to try to avoid trouble. From puberty onward, women of all ages unconsciously tailor their lives, activities and work to accommodate the very real threat of violence and crime.

While carrying a gun won't solve the larger and more complex issues of living within a violent society, it **is** one of the few ways a woman – and certainly a petite one – can level the field if someone large and adrenaline-charged is determined to do her lethal harm.

Whatever their race, marital status, sexual preference, place of residence, education or income level, **three-quarters of all women** will become a victim of crime. It's an identity none of us assumes willingly – yet one we have to think about, prepare for, and face head-on if we are to increase our odds of staying safe.

When, in 1993, the National Rifle Association launched "Refuse to be a Victim", a pilot series of self-protection seminars in Houston, Miami and Washington/Baltimore, more than 20,000 women called a 1-800 number asking for a 42-point safety brochure and information on schedules and registration.

A woman considering buying a gun for self-defense, whether as the survivor of an attack, or in preparation for a day she prays will never arrive, must confront several frightening realities:

- police who might not respond quickly enough to your 911 call to save your life or protect you from serious injury
- rapists who remain at large, or serve short sentences and are soon back on the street
- vicious, violent and vengeful spouses or boyfriends
- ineffectual restraining orders against such men
- criminals who select as their prey women they perceive as weak – i.e. those emotionally and physically unprepared for attack

It won't happen to me. I live in a good neighborhood. I date nice guys. I avoid rough areas. I choose upscale hotels.

Denial spins a seductive cocoon.

I first became an adult crime statistic as a college sophomore, living alone in a tiny studio apartment in what, in 20/20 hindsight, was an affordable but remarkably poor choice -- a main-floor apartment at the back of an alley on a busy street in downtown Toronto. Mine was not, per se, a dangerous neighborhood, but there was much pedestrian traffic and loud, drunk passersby heading home from local bars.

One balmy May evening, I lay in the bath reading. Something stirred the heavy woven cloth of the curtain, barely three feet above my head. There was no breeze – a man's hands thrust through the cloth, trying to pull my slippery body out the low, narrow window. He failed and, after about five minutes of struggle, rapped the top of my skull with his knuckles, and took off.

I never told the police, assuming my assailant would have long since disappeared on foot. I was too shocked to even recall his features. I moved out of that apartment, my first sweet taste of independence, the next day and suffered nightmares for months. Ever since, I've chosen top-floor apartments with no exterior access to my doors or windows.

Despite my experience, I never understood the visceral desire to own a gun for self-defense. Until, 22 years later, living in a small, pretty town near Manhattan, another criminal entered my life. A con man who had done jail time in Illinois for widespread fraud there placed a personal ad in my local weekly newspaper, posing as a "wealthy Wall Street attorney." Lonely, I answered it. Handsome, well-dressed, witty and fun, he kept up his manicured appearances for several months, allowing him time to earn my

trust and access to my home. After he opened my mail, stole a credit card, forged my signature and went on a spree, I awoke from my naïve coma.

I went to the police to have him arrested and then, in a fit of confused remorse, withdrew my complaint. In their eyes, this made me a hysterical liar whose word was worthless. When I returned a month later with evidence proving multiple felonies, they dismissed me. So did the district attorney.

I was on my own. The man phoned me for weeks, shrieking abuse and threats with impunity; the police, we both knew, would not help me. I changed my locks, bank accounts and phone number. I refused to move, unwilling to let this monster force me to sell my home.

But my fear of his venomous rage, his certainty he'll evade arrest and prosecution --- and my frustration at the authorities' disinterest in taking my case -- makes self-defense a more compelling issue for me. When, four years later, my beloved red convertible was stolen in front of my suburban apartment building, I once more felt violated and impotent. I fantasized wildly about confronting the three thieves -- seen by a neighbor -- with a loaded handgun. I would have shot out the tires, not at them.

Or so I think.

I was 12 when I first held a gun. It felt cold and heavy, something dead and awkward in my hand. My father, who'd been given the Colt .45 by a northern Alberta fur trapper named Dmitri he'd met while making a film, kept it in an old pine cabinet in his downtown Toronto apartment. I never saw it again. Like most urban Canadian women, guns weren't part of my daily life.

I first touched a gun in the United States, my adopted home of 16 years, in the elegant Upper East Side apartment of a good friend, then a single woman in her early 30s. She owns a small revolver, a Colt .38. I stared at it in fascination, struggling to reconcile a potentially deadly weapon with the slim, soft-spoken blond who owns it.

I picked it up. Tiny, compact, its scored wooden grip lay cleanly and comfortably in my hand. I felt...invincible.

Intrigued by the power and lethality I cradled so easily in my palm, in 1996 I attended a three-day defensive weapons class at the Smith & Wesson Academy, a school in Springfield, MA, that normally trains law enforcement officers from around the world. It also teaches civilians of all ages how to aim, shoot, clean and care for their own weapons.

What I saw and felt there stirred up a potent mixture of emotions. I was terrified to actually fire a gun the first time. Everyone in my class of 12 adults already owned one, or many, and had easily shot their first rounds. In silence, they watched me expectantly. I thought I might faint, but two female instructors, whispering softly beside my ear (muffled by protective headgear) talked me through my fear. I finally squeezed the trigger of the smooth, black Smith & Wesson 9mm. A tiny, loud flame erupted 27 inches away from my face as the bullet flew towards a paper target. The gun recoiled

between my palms, the brass casing pinged onto the concrete floor and a flood of adrenaline coursed through me.

Oh my.

I spent three days there, for hours shooting round after round after round of ammunition. Guns, I soon learned, were loud and smelly. I wore plastic goggles over my glasses to protect my eyes, and long sleeves to cover my arms and wrists from the hot flying bits of brass ejected from each fired cartridge. After a few hours of shooting, my hands hurt from the recoil. But after the initial shock wore off, it was actually great fun.

Like most women who try it, I quickly took to handgun shooting. My shots were clean and accurate, easily puncturing the head and chest area of the man-shaped paper target seven yards ahead of me down the indoor range. Outside, it was July, the sun hot and bright. Indoors, the range was dark and dim, only the paper targets brightly spotlighted, powerful fans whisking away the lead dust, smoke and smell after each shot. Aiming, firing, drilling, loading and re-loading the magazine of my borrowed \$600 pistol, I glimpsed a new woman inside me, one bristling with an unsettling kind of competence. I could aim, fire and hit with some measure of accuracy.

I liked the novel feeling of power this gave me – and I imagined a life where I kept a sleek, familiar 9mm near me, a life in which I might never again fear rape, robbery, mugging. One in which I could walk and drive and travel freely, confident, if necessary, that I could match menace with menace. My bullets punched a tidy, tight ring of holes in my targets. With this loud, lethal reply to random viciousness in my hands, I finally felt fearless.

Oh my, indeed.

What was I now to **do** with this knowledge?

But why focus specifically on women and guns? What is it that makes owning or using a gun, or being bereaved by its use, or being around a gun-owner, different for women?

For one thing, there are so many of them – an estimated 11 to 17 million American women own a firearm. Forty percent of all American homes contain a pistol, revolver, shotgun, rifle or combination of these. Even women who hate and fear guns are often exposed to them in the hands of their fathers, brothers, boyfriends, husbands or male friends. Add drugs, alcohol, rage or depression – each a catalyst for violence, and each of which infects millions of American households – and the odds of an American woman growing up free of contact with guns or gun-related violence, are slim.

Women spend their lifetimes in fear of rape. In 1996, 307,000 women were the victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault. (It's estimated 3 to 10 times that number go unreported.) Bureau of Justice statistics show that 44 percent of completed rapes occur in a woman's home (while nearly the rest take place on the sidewalks, or in a park, field, playground, parking lot or parking garage.) As we'll discuss later in more detail in Chapter 4, *The Decision to Arm*, the most legally defensible shooting incidents in self-defense tend to be in one's own home. Rape usually comes by surprise and at

night – and 36 percent of all victims are injured physically in addition to the sexual assault. **Twenty-nine percent of rapists are armed.**

Yet women who choose to own guns receive little media attention, in part because they tend to be law-abiding. Pick up your local newspaper any given week and you'll read of an enraged ex-husband or boyfriend who has gone on a rampage, massacring his former partner, and often her children, before killing himself. When fired, vengeful employees return to their place of employment to execute co-workers or managers, the shooters -- invariably -- are male.

Women who own and use guns tend to keep it quiet: they don't want their guns stolen; neighbors, friends and family may hesitate to let their children socialize with hers; gun-control advocates may barrage her with their unwanted opinions. It's often a choice best kept secret.

Because of their smaller size and relative physical weakness, women, no matter how strong, angry or trained in martial arts, remain at a comparative disadvantage when it comes to self-defense; **a gun, police and self-defense experts agree, is the only weapon that truly levels the field in a life-threatening confrontation.**

Whatever their age, race or income level, women create and nurture a wide web of relationships: to family and friends, to mentors and students, to employers, colleagues and subordinates, to fellow-members of a spiritual community or volunteer group. We are most often defined by, and nourished by, these emotional, spiritual or intellectual connections.

Yet buying or owning a gun, whether for sport, competition or self-defense, creates a series of questions especially challenging for women as it challenges our connections:

- Should I tell anyone?
- Who can I tell?
- When should I talk about it?
- How much information, and when, should I share about this decision with a boyfriend, husband, children, step-children and grand-children?
- What about non gun-owning friends and colleagues visiting my home?

For centuries, women have been entrusted with the moral care of their families; keeping a .38 in the night table can complicate matters enormously.

And still, for some women, owning a gun is simply **no big deal.**

My Manhattan friend, like many men, has owned and shot guns all her life. She shops for them with the same fervor and intense pleasure she also combs flea markets for old flasks and silver cigarette cases. The three guns in her apartment serve very different functions. Two are for hunting. The third, she explains simply, is her "protection firearm."

Why does she even have three guns? One can logically argue she has no practical need for any of them. This smart, savvy woman, educated in the finest

American private schools, now lives with a physically strong and brave husband. But as a young girl, she was beaten routinely and brutally by a family member until one day, despairing of escape or credibility with her local police, she shot him. He lived, and didn't press charges.

She's also American. The United States constitution enshrines her right to bear arms, no matter how shocking the consequences. The Second Amendment protects her rights as effectively as those of a man.

"Guns kill, but guns protect," she says. "They're an enormous equalizer between the weak and vicious."

My friend's guns remain a non-negotiable part of her sense of self.

There is no "female" attitude to guns. There are women as passionately attached to the sensuality, utility and fine design of their Berettas and Glocks as to their well-used copper saucepans or sexy summer sandals. For them, a gun is simply another tool, as useful, personal and pleasurable an object as a well-designed sports car, timepiece or computer.

Some women hunt deer, elk, moose, pheasant, quail, rabbits or squirrels. For some it offers enjoyment, for others the pleasures of being outdoors with friends, testing their skills. It may feed their families or earn them needed income. Some travel on hunting safaris to Africa with their daughters, delighting in the chance to kill big game. Some love to shoot skeet, clays and trap, mingling easily on country weekends with corporate CEOs and European aristocrats. Some travel the country to hone their skills and test them in regional and national athletic competition.

Many others, even those whose lives remain personally unscathed by intimate contact with guns, simply find the subject repellent and unpleasant. In their eyes, guns represent only injury, violence, crime and death.

And some women carry apparently conflicting viewpoints on gun control or advocacy. Several women in this book have lost family members to homicide or suicide, yet remain convinced that gun ownership is a sensible choice, even a necessity.

As a Canadian who grew up in a gun-controlled and pacifist culture, who has lived in England, France and Mexico, my aim is to examine the intersection of guns and American women's lives, to investigate gun ownership and use, and its portrayal in the media, as both a cultural artifact and historical byproduct of a country founded on a distrust of government and institutional authority.

Less dispassionately, the subject endlessly fascinates me, cutting as it does relentlessly and continuously, decade after decade, across lines of income, gender, age, race, income or education. None of us is totally immune – physically, emotionally, intellectually or politically -- to the effects of gun violence and its costs to American society. Even in Manhattan, where legally acquiring a pistol remains more difficult than almost anywhere in the country, gun violence, most often perpetrated by men, is inescapable. As I write this, headlines detail the murder of a talented and ambitious young actress living in downtown Manhattan, shot in the face by her ex-fiance.

With an estimated 200 million guns in private hands in the U.S., regulating their use, defending children from gun accidents, and enforcing current laws often appears a fruitless, if essential, exercise.

In a culture that lionizes individual rights, self-reliance, resourcefulness and power, (not to mention the Second Amendment, allowing the right to bear arms), the gun – whether you love, loathe or remain indifferent to it -- remains an inescapable part of daily American life.

Voices in this book include:

Lawmakers, such as those in Louisiana, where a pro-gun governor, Mike Foster, faced down New Orleans mayor Marc Morial over a proposed bill that would allow claims against gun manufacturers for the costs of gun-related violence. It was the first of 34 lawsuits brought by city governments. Foster won.

Gun manufacturers, such as Smith & Wesson, who have tailored their marketing and advertising to women in recent years. What strategies are they using to win women, and with what success?

Shooters Women who have shot and killed, or badly injured their targets and who have paid the price, psychologically and legally. Amy Fisher, the “Long Island Lolita,” served seven years for shooting the wife of her lover Joey Buttafuoco and, at time of writing this book, had begun a new career writing a twice-weekly column in a Long Island newspaper. Amazingly, Mary Jo Buttafuoco, who still carries the bullet in her neck, argued for Fisher’s early release from prison. Jean Harris, a former private school headmistress who shot her lover, diet doctor Dr. Herbert Tarnower, became similarly notorious. Yolanda Saldivar added to that history on March 31, 1995, when she shot and killed the popular Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla-Perez.

Victims Studies have shown that women who carry or own handguns are less likely to be attacked. Writer and shooting instructor Paxton Quigley switched her allegiance from anti-gun to pro-gun after interviewing jailed rapists for her book; they told her they would not have attacked a woman they presumed armed.

Competitors. Some women love to shoot, and they’re good at it. Women who compete in skeet shooting and other sports have a love for guns that is wholly separate from those who shoot to protect themselves. Between 1990 and 1997, the number of women shooting clays jumped 112 percent. From 1989 to 1997, the number of women shooting skeet rose by 23 percent. While many women traditionally learn to shoot from their husbands, in a new and dramatic shift, more are now reaching for guns, and instruction, on their own.

Hunters. Yes, women hunt.

Teenagers Whether they have seen friends or relatives killed, are avid high-school or collegiate riflery competitors, or new members of Second Amendment Sisters, young women have strong opinions about gun use and ownership.

Firearms professionals. Police officers, members of the armed forces, security guards, corrections officers and bodyguards all work with guns strapped to their bodies. How does this affect them? Do colleagues and criminals treat them differently? Where do they keep their guns at home? How do they reconcile their role as nurturer/protector of their families with a deadly weapon?

Women who live in fear. Whether living alone at the end of a rural road far from police, or in the inner city, with young children or walking or driving through dangerous neighborhoods, women are sick of being scared. Carrying a gun in their purse or car, or concealed on their body, is one solution. Some feel they need it to remain safe at work, late at night or in an isolated area. Who are these women, what weapons are they buying, legally or not, and what difference is it making in their lives?

Health-care workers who treat gunshot victims. Female emergency room physicians, nurses and physical therapists spend their days working to repair the damage inflicted by accidental or criminal firearm use.

Women in the media, arts and entertainment industry, whose views and visions help to inform America's gun culture. Whether its New York art gallery owner Mary Boone, arrested and jailed for distributing live ammunition as part of a show, or *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, writing, "I am not the sort of person who should be allowed to walk out of a store with a really big gun in half an hour," high-profile women influence the debate, even if they don't own a firearm. Actress Rosie O'Donnell shouted her opposition to guns at the 2000 Million Mom March. Actress Meryl Streep refused to hold a gun in the promotional poster for her film *The River Wild*, saying: "To me, every movie star who stands up and points a gun at America is not only selling the movie, they're selling the gun."

There are many American voices here, of women and men, ages 13 to 72, black, white, Hispanic and Asian, gay and straight, urban and rural, blue-collar workers and degreed professionals. They are high school students and emergency room physicians, bereaved wives and mothers, elite athletes and law enforcement officials, businesswomen, legislators, lobbyists and lawyers.

Intrigued by less-audible and more-nuanced individual voices, I deliberately chose not to seek sources through interest groups such as the National Rifle Association or The Brady Campaign, although I include some of their institutional views and concerns. I found subjects largely through personal contacts, conducting more than 100 interviews by telephone, email and in person; when I did not meet someone in person, I have verified their identity. Unless identified, and credited to others in the endnotes, all interviews are the product of my own original firsthand reporting. I sought the views of girls and women from small towns and major cities, from Maine to Mississippi, Vermont to California, Alaska to Florida. I wanted to hear from women who grew up around guns and those buying their first weapon at midlife and those would never consider making such a purchase.

Unless otherwise stated, the sources' real names and other identifying details are unchanged.

This book includes women who hate and fear guns and those who enjoy them immensely, women who buy and sell them, who teach others how to shoot, and those who have shot for sport, for pleasure, in anger or in self-defense. My aim is not to judge them, but to present their views and their voices.

I chose not to investigate militias, girl gangs or female crime. I did interview, (and quote from the literature on), women who killed their intimate partners – by far the most common female criminal use of firearms. This is not meant to be an exhaustive catalogue of everything women do, or have done to them, with guns, but a look at some of the most important ways that women and guns intersect.

It is not my intent to persuade you that women should own guns, nor that women should eschew them. It is a profoundly personal choice. I do not own a gun, although I've enjoyed target shooting; the social responsibility of keeping a firearm in my home is not one I'm ready to assume.

My aim is to introduce some of the millions of American women -- from the earliest beginnings of this country -- whose lives are, and have been throughout history, intimately entwined with guns and their effects, overt and covert, subtle and stunning.

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Chapter 1: A Moving Target

It's 8:30 a.m. on a sunny Saturday, mid-July. Manhattan streets are silent, parking places plentiful. Twenty-seven women, ranging in age from their early 20s to late 60s, file into the basement of a handsome cast-iron building on the south side of West 20th street. This is Chelsea, a predominantly gay neighborhood of chic bars and shops. The women sign in at the door, each filling out a legally-required form testifying, among other prerequisites, that they aren't "habitual drunkards" or the subject of a restraining order. Shyly, curiously, they steal glances at the reason they've come. A shooting range.

Behind the thick wall of glass separating the narrow, cramped lobby from the range, the only such private facility in Manhattan, they can hear a steady, unfamiliar sound, the "slam!slam!slam!" of something large-caliber. The women are the mix you'd see on any subway platform: slim and pretty, 200 pounds and tattooed-and-pierced. They include college students, attorneys, a travel agent, City Hall employees, a mutual-funds marketer, an Ivy MBA, black, white, Hispanic and Asian. For most, today will mark a communal rite of passage -- their first time handling a gun.

They're also making Manhattan history, the first foray by the National Rifle Association's "Women on Target" campaign, a national 100-event-a-year effort to win new women shooters, into the heart of gun-control territory. Manhattan is the nation's toughest city in which to obtain a pistol permit.

The day starts with an hour-long classroom lecture on safety, the walls covered in plastic banners for Glock, Winchester, National Rifle Association, Colt. Mike Bodner, a white, 41-year-old electrical engineer and volunteer safety instructor, shows photographs and diagrams of a .22 rifle, the only gun one can legally shoot in New York City without a permit. In his baggy chinos, black lace-up dress shoes and wire-rimmed glasses, Bodner is a good choice, unthreatening, funny and friendly. "It's going to be very safe, it's going to be very fun. You'll really enjoy it," he promises.

After demonstrating how to stand, breathe and fire the rifle, explaining the arcana of caliber and squibloads, it's time to shoot. The women put on "eyes and ears" (heavy plastic protection for both), and file into the range. They're nervous, excited, not quite sure what to expect.

The 14 narrow wooden booths are lined with white acoustic tile shredded by years of flying brass ejected from thousands of guns. They load the cartridges, no bigger than their baby fingernail. A paper target is clipped to a metal hook, then wheeled out, clothesline-style, to a distance of 25 feet.

Cecelia Fitzgerald, 38, a soft-spoken New Zealander and a court-appointed attorney in Brooklyn, steps up, cradles the rifle, leans her elbows onto a wooden ledge for extra support, then fires.

She steps out of the booth, her face a kaleidoscope of emotion, her hazel eyes focused on something invisible, unable to speak. After 20 minutes of shooting, she inspects her targets, the small black circle at their exact center frayed with bullet holes. Hers. She's smiling now, relaxed, a little overwhelmed. Her reaction is typical. When women discover they shoot well, and enjoy it, it's unnerving, unexpected. Disarming.

Americans like to take power into their own hands --- and a gun is the simplest and most effective way to do it. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, revealed the nation's intelligence and law enforcement weakness, as Tom Ridge and his staff scrambled to create and run the Office of Homeland Security, as Americans learned the new rainbow of risk-status alerts and the CIA vainly sought new Arabic-speaking agents, individual self-protection gained sudden urgency.

Wealthy or poor, black, white, Asian or Hispanic, straight or gay, a new citizen or direct Mayflower descendant, every American enjoys the constitutionally protected right to own a firearm, in 33 states a weapon you can legally carry concealed under a jacket, on your hip, in your purse or glove compartment.

Ask a foreigner to name a few products quintessentially American: Coca-Cola, MTV, apple pie, baseball, hot dogs.

Guns.

Like those other innocent, ubiquitous icons of Americana, firearms here cross class lines with ease. Only in this country can you find the same object -- a gun -- tucked into the rhinestone-studded

Judith Leiber minaudiere of a Dallas socialite or stashed beneath the mattress in a rural Alabama tarpaper shack. At the 57th street Manhattan showrooms of British gunmaker Holland & Holland, a wealthy woman can buy a \$50,000 shotgun, while 70 blocks north in Harlem a woman with only \$50 to spend can acquire a "Saturday night special", the generic name for a cheap, small handgun.

The essential difference? Only one of those purchases is legal.

The ultimate expression of American values --- individual, quick, self-reliant, direct, essential a century ago to frontier survival --- the gun today remains as much a symbol of freedom as its guarantor. Owning a gun allows Americans to hew to their frontier need-turned-ideal, protecting oneself and one's family without relying on others.

An estimated 11 to 17 million women now own guns. Forty per cent of American homes -- many of them headed by divorced women, often with children -- contain a firearm. As more women run their households alone, without the protection of a man familiar with firearms, it is increasingly women who are buying guns for themselves. We no longer turn automatically to a man for succor --- it's typically a man we are fleeing in fear. When, in the summer of 2002, a serial killer began slaughtering women in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, dozens of women of all ages made the only choice they considered effective, flocking to gun ranges and dealers.

The National Rifle Association, which by 2003 had a record number of female members (170,000) says attendance at "Women on Target" has increased 300 percent since 2000. In January 2003, the first issue of *Woman's Outlook*, a monthly magazine published by the NRA for women, rolled off the press. Articles included a feature on Annie Oakley, secrets of successful shotgunning and a first-person account of a mid-life transformation from non-hunter to hunter. In the February 2003 issue, writer Katherine Rauch advised women on a wide variety of options for carrying concealed handguns, from handbags to backpacks and briefcases.

More than 10,000 women now belong to Second Amendment Sisters, an Internet-based pro-gun organization for women founded in 1999, when the group organized a rally as a counterpoint to the Million Mom March in Washington. More than 5,000 people turned out for the event. A second march is planned for May 2004.

A 1999 survey conducted by *Women & Guns* magazine, a publication with 18,000 readers, showed that many of its readers want guns as a form of personal protection. Most surveyed had owned guns for more than 10 years. Many were single or headed single-parent households.

And, after September 11, 2001, many women are determined to take control of their own safety, just as the women's movement led many to take control of careers and finances.

"There's a sense of danger now, an awareness that there may come a point where I am responsible for myself and other human beings," says *Women & Guns* editor Peggy Tartaro. "So, a lot of women are saying: Now is the time to go out to the range and learn how a gun functions." 1

Yet public debate of gun ownership, when it includes female voices, usually focuses only on those opposed to firearms. Conventional wisdom suggests that women, pacific by gender, are uniformly opposed to gun ownership.

A woman's choice to own a firearm, or several, is often private and layered.

It may come from a place of fear, from an abusive childhood or marriage. Or a sense of caution, a job performed at night, or alone, or alone at night, driving alone at odd hours, through dangerous or isolated areas. It may be motivated by the pleasure of rising at 4 a.m., shrugging into longjohns and camouflage, filling a Thermos with hot, strong coffee and heading into snowy woods or misty marshlands with other hunters who share her passion.

Sometimes it's the joy of target-shooting shoulder to shoulder with fellow athletes from across the country, or the world, equally skilled and determined. "I'll be shooting until I'm 80 or 90," exults trap-shooter and Atlanta Olympic gold medallist Kim Rhode, who at 17 became the youngest woman ever to win a gold medal in trap shooting. "The people are so nice and the outdoors are so beautiful. It's a combination you just can't give up." 2

Owning and enjoying their antique hunting rifle or former service weapon offers many women gunowners a powerful emotional connection to a beloved brother, husband, father or grandfather. Sometimes it's the chance to develop skills and confidence while sharing a favorite activity. For Randi Rogers, who became the world champion of cowboy action shooting (rapid-fire precision work using a .22 rifle) two years ago at the age of 15, it's a great way to spend time with, be coached by, and get to know her beloved grandfather. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have gotten into shooting," she says. **3**

A gun offers women the same pleasures and privileges it offers men: skill, competence, camaraderie, safety, self-reliance, independence.

When the National Shooting Sports Foundation, which represents the gun industry, held one of its regular media education seminars in Danbury, Connecticut, 36-year-old reporter Karen Ali was quickly hooked. A legal affairs reporter for the Danbury *News-Times*, Ali had never touched a gun before she spent a hot, sunny mid-July day at the range being introduced to a dozen different handguns by some of the country's top shooters. "I got a kick out of shooting and I'm thinking of getting one," she told a fellow writer. "I want to get one. I really do." **4**

A small group had come from *Popular Mechanics* and, as one of their staff stepped back after her first shot, she seemed stunned by pleasure. "This is **fun!**" she whispered.

It **is** fun. Target shooting – which most women do well from their first shot – can be a blast. Like any other sport requiring precision, hand-eye coordination and a set of specific athletic skills, shooting can prove alluring.

Once a woman discovers she likes to shoot, her most pressing question becomes: 'What next?'

The Second Amendment, allowing Americans the right to bear arms, (to the letter of the law, as a militita member), remains a source of unresolvable political debate, a thorn deeply embedded in the body politic.

With the majority of Americans now living in cities, police a 911 call away, a gun for many of us is now less an object of practical necessity than of desire. And the dogged attachment to firearm ownership continually frays the borders between individual rights and collective safety, creating inherent tension between legal rights and social responsibilities.

What happens when, thanks to my constitutionally-mandated right to own a gun, my son kills yours? My husband blows away his co-workers? Post-mortem lawsuits don't address the underlying issues.

Guns legally bought and carefully stored, through robbery or carelessness, fall into criminal hands. Children find guns, show off and accidentally kill one another. (In 2001, 17,424 Americans were killed by guns; [43,501 died in motor vehicle deaths and 16,274 in falls.]) Rage-steeped teens open fire on their classmates and teachers. Stray gunfire now demarcates some American neighborhoods as clearly and lethally as coils of razorwire.

Gun safety is an issue we ignore at our peril. Across the country, children play after school in unsupervised homes containing firearms. Which of your children's friends' parents own firearms? Where or how they are stored? Where is *yours*? Are you sure it's unloaded, the ammunition completely inaccessible? As wives and daughters and sisters and mothers and friends of men who may be careless about using, cleaning or storing their guns, it's an issue we can't simply wish away. Whether you choose to voice your concerns or not, whether you own a gun or could not imagine touching one, as a voter and an American, you're a part of the story. You may not have joined the conversation, nor wish to, but it is one that touches and includes each of us.

There is no way to tidily label responsible gun-owners. Anyone of us can be, or become irresponsible. Rage, depression, drug use and alcohol abuse infect millions of American homes every day. Each of these additives endangers a household that contains a firearm and ammunition. No matter how well-trained in its safe use, if someone in your household suffers from depression and/or indulges in substance abuse, an accessible or loaded gun is your worst nightmare waiting to happen.

Yet millions of gunowners **do** store, shoot and teach their children to use guns responsibly and enjoyably.

In other countries – Canada, England, Australia, Japan – guns are heavily-controlled, if not outlawed. But these are nations with much smaller populations, profoundly different historical roots and divergent visions of what constitutes polity. Canadians, whose constitution enshrines “peace, order and good government”, focus on cooperation, consensus and the common good, values that dominate every public policy decision, from cradle-to-grave health care to strong labor unions. Every Canadian enjoys “free” health care, (paid for through many layers of personal tax), and survey after survey shows a fervent national determination to support this egalitarian system; if restricting access to guns conserves for other uses the millions of health-care dollars that might otherwise treat victims of gun violence or accidents – so be it.

Additional forces make Canada far less violent: a judicial system whose structure discourages civil litigiousness and awards smaller damages; a relatively small population (27 million) that enjoys a wider, deeper social safety net, and a shared understanding that personal and political problems are best resolved through negotiation and compromise, not confrontation and firepower.

Canada, ironically, carries a much sadder legacy of gun-related mass female murder. On December 16, 1989, 13 female Montreal engineering students were injured and another 14 killed by Marc Lepine, a disgruntled 25-year-old who opened fire on them shouting “I want the women. I hate feminists.” Lepine carried a concealed Sturm Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle into their college, the Ecole Polytechnique, ordered men out of a classroom, lined women up against a wall and began executing them, shooting himself afterwards.

It was an act of mass murder unprecedented, and unsurpassed, in Canadian history. “Les Quatorze” , as they have been immortalized, guarantee a long collective memory of gun violence against women, and a steely political resolve to fight it. It also spurred gun-control legislation in 1991 and 1998 that banned all semi-automatic, military assault weapons and short-barreled handguns and required, starting in 2003, registration of all firearms.

In the United States, a nation focused on each citizen’s right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” one that relies on the free market for health insurance, (leaving 43 million with no coverage at all), it’s about personal freedom and private choice. The founding fathers, in contrast to other nations who eschew the private ownership of guns, broke away from regal authority, creating a new nation based on the principles of self-reliance and self-determination. Americans fought a Civil War that pitted citizen against fellow citizen. In the 1800s, thousands moved westward, often far from the protection of a sheriff, confronting wild animals, Indians, outlaws and bandits. For 140 years after the nation was founded, before the vast majority of Americans moved to policed towns and cities, Americans *needed* guns.

(In some places, the mindset has changed little. Panhandle-shaped magnets sold by Texas souvenir shops, topped with a tiny gun, warn: “In Texas, we don’t dial 911.” Several towns, including Virgin, UT and Kennesaw, GA have made it illegal for a head of household **not** to own a gun.)

Above all, Americans value individual freedom, and anything they think will safeguard it. While we collectively profess horror every time the litany of mass gun violence lengthens – the Luby’s massacre, the high-school shootings at Columbine, Santana, Santee – we quickly return to business-as-usual.

Often subsidized by employers, our health insurance premiums give a falsely reassuring reading. Surely we’re not paying for gun violence if a bullet hasn’t directly hit us. But we are. Our health care costs, private and public, are as artificially inflated by the annual costs of treating gunshot victims, whether they live or die, as our credit-card interest rates are boosted by the hidden costs of others’ theft and fraud.

Hospitals across the country, duty-bound to treat anyone who shows up in the emergency room, are losing a fortune to gun violence. Medicaid only pays about 50 percent of the costs of treating the uninsured, while the hospital eats the rest. Sixty trauma centers around the U.S. have closed in the past 10 years, unable to meet their costs.

“Just putting someone in the intensive care unit costs \$20,000 a day,” says Detroit surgeon Scott Dulchavsky. Gunshot victims also require expensive forms of surgery – a laparotomy (opening up the abdomen) costs \$41,000, and a thoracotomy (opening the chest) around \$26,000. Dr. Robert Wilson, a trauma surgeon who has operated on thousands of Detroit gunshot victims, says more-powerful weapons inflict greater damage than before. “New high velocity weapons cause damage inches away

from where the bullet was travelling – modern weaponry causes far more devastating injuries,” he says. “There’s no doubt it is harder to save people these days.” **5**

It costs more than **\$21 billion** a year to treat gunshot victims, according to a 1993 study. **6**
 Call it the Second Amendment tax.

But it is countered by significant income from the sale of firearms; the 11% government excise tax on long guns and ammunition paid by manufacturers in 1998 generated \$126,620,000 for the federal treasury. The 10% excise tax on handguns in 1998 generated another \$35,528,000. **7**

The gun industry represents another significant player in the debate. In 1998, total sales on long guns, handguns, and ammunition amounted to approximately \$2.1 billion with rifles and shotguns accounting for \$852,819,800, handguns \$497,392,000, and ammunition \$758,560,000. And hunting adds yet another boost to the U.S. economy. According to its most recent five-year study, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service reports that hunters and shooters spent \$20.6 billion on their activities in 1995. Annually, hunters spend approximately \$2.5 billion on food and lodging with another \$1.7 billion spent on transportation. Aside from their expenditures on firearms and ammunition, hunters annually spend over \$7.4 billion on equipment, clothing, camping gear, decoys and game calls, telescopic sights and binoculars, boats and campers, and related items. Approximately \$652 million are spent on hunting licenses, special stamps and game tags each year. **8**

The manufacture, sale and use of firearms affects not only thousands of American-owned businesses but fills government coffers. In a closed loop, much of this money is recycled to state hunting programs.

It’s somehow easier to dismiss a woman’s desire to own a gun, certainly for self-protection. The very idea leaves many squeamish. Shooting and killing is a man’s job, they argue, a dirty business best left to police, security guards, the military, a husband or father skilled with a weapon. Yet, if a large, angry man is trying to rape you or beat you or kill you, the odds of someone armed and efficient arriving within those crucial few minutes are slim.

It’s easier to dismiss a woman’s desire to own a gun for self-defense if you’ve never been a crime victim, haven’t felt the cool disinterest of police or the judicial system, have never heard the peculiar whizz of a bullet splitting the air over your head or attended the funeral of a friend or relative shot in anger or by accident. Gun control remains an academic debate, often moderated by those who enjoy the security of a gated community, a well-policed suburb or a neighborhood with private armed patrols – like those employed by middle-class whites and blacks alike in New Orleans.

“My children are my life,” wrote novelist Susan Straight about her ex-husband’s growing, and initially-hidden, fascination with guns that ended their marriage. “I don’t want scars on their bodies or in their brains and hearts. The way parents were afraid of polio in the 1950s, scared of public pools and free-floating germs, I am afraid of guns.”

Yet, she admitted, “when I think about a wild stranger touching my children I wish, even briefly, for a handgun. On our strolls to 7-11 for Slurpees, I watch everyone passing us on the busy street, on the eucalyptus-lined sidewalks. I plan what I will do to an attacker. I admit it –I visualize ‘the great equalizer’, the peacemaker, the one thing that would make me, 5-4 and 105 pounds, able to repel anyone who tried to hurt my girls.” **9**

However ambivalent, women must still decide for themselves. And the issue is hardly color-blind.

Although black women make up 6.5 percent of the U.S. population, they accounted for 41% of the female homicide victims in 1992. “They have it the toughest,” says Police Sgt. Malissa Sims, of Waco, TX. “Being black and being a woman – it’s a double negative.” **10**

Most vulnerable to violent crime, poor women of color often live in dangerous neighborhoods or buildings with no security, rely exclusively on infrequent public transit and walk through dark, unmonitored hallways to reach their front door. Drive-by shootings and stray gunfire from drug-related turf battles are common. Young children in inner-city neighborhoods learn to hide in the bathtub where bullets cannot penetrate. Police may arrive late, or not at all. For these women, the debate is hardly academic.

Even when a young black man struggles to leave a life of crime, he's not safe. Ask Paula Reynolds, whose 17-year-old son Omain Gullette -- who after four arrests had become so determined a student-athlete he was offered a football scholarship to Syracuse University. Gullette was shot and killed one July afternoon on a Philadelphia street by three men. "It wasn't meant for him," said a friend wounded in the attack. "He was trying to be a negotiator." **11**

Only after a woman has suffered attack or bereavement involving a firearm does the debate, literally, hit home. Yet indignant, emotional attacks on gunowners, often made by other women, are relentless.

"This is what I want to know" wrote Sallie Tisdale. **12** "Why do we need to balance the 'needs and desires of gun enthusiasts' with anything at all? It is exactly this hedged liberal urge to satisfy everyone that has gotten us into the dreadful mess we find ourselves in today -- a mess that the writers of the Constitution would have deplored... Why must we listen to the claims of gun lovers, or make any effort at all to satisfy their irrational appetite for weapons? Why should we bow to the rage and hunger of a single-issue lobby?... I am no longer an advocate of gun control. I am an advocate of gun elimination."

Depending where they live, women considering a gun purchase -- certainly for hunting or self-defense, which by definition involve the readiness to kill -- can face powerful social disapproval from other women. A white 40-year-old fundraiser working in Manhattan was "creeped-out" by her co-worker's enthusiasm when she discovered her colleague had bought a rifle and was simply training for the summer biathlon, an athletic Olympic event that combines running and shooting. "Guns **kill**. Men **kill**. Women don't kill!" she said. She has since softened her position, but initially found the very idea of a gun used for sports "bizarre."

No wonder so many women stay quiet.

Despite the feminist movement -- and sometimes because of it -- arming oneself remains a highly divisive choice. Mainstream feminists, typically, are eager to distance themselves from guns, arguing that women should choose, and focus on, non-violent alternatives. Women opposed to firearms bolster their argument by quoting poet Audre Lorde: "One cannot dismantle the Master's house using the Master's tools." Only by abandoning the symbols of patriarchal oppression, some argue, can women create and strengthen kinder, gentler new paradigms -- theoretical constructs of no practical use mid-rape, robbery or assault.

Real feminists remain unarmed.

Or do they?

What kind of guns do women buy? A survey of 600 U.S. firearms dealers found that the number of female gun-buyers had increased "a lot" (17 percent) or "significantly" (19 percent), with 87 percent of women buyers arming themselves to protect themselves and their homes. Fifty-eight percent of these women were between 31 and 40, and 46 percent of them had "some" university education. Barely four percent of gun-buyers had Phds or the equivalent, the survey reported.

Fifty-three percent chose a .38 special, (a gun whose smaller size and lighter weight is often easier on smaller female hands.) More than three-quarters of women, 76 percent, said they prefer handguns for self-defense. Typically, though, women in this survey prefer to leave their guns at home.

Handguns represent one-third of the total number of guns in the country, and *probably 90 percent of them are kept loaded. Yet handguns are involved in only 10 percent of the accidental firearm fatalities; its victims have a 90 percent survival rate, while those wounded with a rifle or shotgun face wounds **four times more lethal.*** **13**

Depending on her social class, political persuasion and neighborhood, an American woman faces wildly differing peer pressure to accept, or reject, gun ownership. In southern states and rural areas with a long tradition of hunting or shooting skeet, trap or clays, guns are ubiquitous, admired and enjoyed, no more remarkable a domestic possession than a toaster or microwave oven. Several upper and middle-class white women I interviewed in Texas and Louisiana said they felt significant peer pressure to get a handgun and know how to use it. "I'd feel like a wimp if I didn't have a gun," said one. "All my friends have one."

Every instructor and police officer I interviewed is adamant on this point: **A woman who buys a gun for self-protection *must* know how to use it.** A Glock in your handbag is worthless if you don't practice enough to use it with total confidence.

In addition to the basic differences between different handguns – larger frame, tighter trigger, heavier weight and larger caliber – there are many subtler distinctions between a semiautomatic pistol and revolver, a rifle and a shotgun.

While researching this book, I shot: a .22 rifle, a 12-gauge shotgun and AR-15 rifle, a .38, .45 A.C.P., .357 Magnum and 9mm, both pistols and revolvers. I wanted to feel, and hear, the differences, and there were many. I have large, muscular hands and the .38 and .22 felt too light and too small. When you fire a gun, the power discharged causes it to recoil. When the gun is smaller there is less room for the power to disseminate, which hurt my hand after just a few shots. The .45, with its larger bullet, felt loud and sludgy, slow and awkward, and the powerful recoil made the whole experience unpleasant.

Like Goldilocks searching for her bowl of porridge, I finally found a good fit, the 9mm. It just feels right in my hand – and the tight circle of bullet holes in my targets when I shoot one confirms it.

The difference, for me, between shooting a pistol (in which the grip, which you hold, contains the receiver which contains the magazine which contains the cartridges which contain the bullets) and a revolver, where the cylinder literally revolves before your eyes, was significant. With a pistol, after loading the magazine and slapping it upwards into position into the gun with the heel of your hand, you don't see the bullets again. With a revolver, every time you shoot, the chamber revolves to move the next cartridge into place. Smoke curls out of the barrel after each shot is fired. As you slowly squeeze the trigger, the chamber revolves before your eyes, a visual reminder you're about to shoot.

A rifle or shotgun further dehumanizes your target. With a .22, the recoil and noise are minimal. No matter how lethal, it feels like a toy. I shot an AR-15, (a modification of the M-16, standard U.S. military issue), at a hunting lodge in central Texas, loaned to me by a businessman from California.

It was night, the air cool and studded with stars. The gun felt trim and compact, easy to lift, aim and fire. It was a totally different experience than shooting a handgun or even a rifle – much quicker to fire and less emotionally-engaging.

Fun. Powerful. A potent combination.

Some women grow up with guns and take their presence in a home for granted. Others, especially those who have never even touched one, often fear or hate them, convinced that bullets can somehow explode on their own. Ignorant of how firearms function, they can't begin to imagine any attraction to gun ownership.

I began to feel like the Pied Piper as friends and acquaintances, none of whom had ever shot, began to want to join me whenever I went to a range. First my 18-year-old research assistant, Rachel, then my 33-year-old neighbor, then a 34-year-old interior designer. I was their entrée into a mysterious, unknown and alluring world, someone not a "gun nut," yet someone they trust who also enjoys shooting.

That sunny Saturday in Manhattan offered proof of guns' allure – organizer Amy Heath, a 34-year-old freelancer who works in film production, had advertised very little, yet was turning women away. That day, more than 50 women showed up, this in a city that makes acquiring personal protection extremely difficult. One, a petite, blond 48-year-old former actress who shares my name, said she'd first encountered guns in November 2001 after dinner with friends in a West Village restaurant. She was led downstairs to a private, members-only range. "I liked it a lot!" she said, laughing at the memory. "My girlfriends were horrified. They all asked 'Why don't you just take a yoga class?'"

Sonia Vargas, 30, a slim, Hispanic woman in a tank top and jeans, was delighted to hit nothing but bullseyes right from the start. "This is awesome!" she grinned. Every woman that day, many initially apprehensive about shooting, was soon giggling and laughing, stunned by their competence, their exhilaration infectious.

For Raquel Angelos, a 22-year-old forensic science student with a thick black ponytail, white T-shirt and baggy jeans, shooting a .22 was simply the latest step in her growing familiarity with firearms. She had already shot a Glock and a derringer, a tiny gun that holds only two cartridges. "I want to start a

collection,” she said unapologetically. Her friends don’t like her fascination. Fellow bus passengers give her dirty looks when she carries a copy of *Guns & Ammo*: “You see *Vogue*, you see *Maxim*, you don’t see a gun magazine.” Shooting is something she’s proud of, a skill that tells the world she’s capable. “I think there’s a stereotypical view that women are careless, not in control of their own situations. This is good. This shows women **can** do it. It’s female empowerment.”

Jennifa Willis, 42, a travel agent originally from Trinidad, came with her two daughters, Keshalle – who shoots at a range in New Jersey -- and Kizzy. She was positively giddy with pleasure at her rapid progress. “I didn’t want to have anything to do with a gun. But it’s nice. I’m going to tell everybody I did it. I’m going to brag!”

Most of the women produced extremely tight groupings of shots, many of them bullseyes. All were eager to take their paper targets to work, joking they’d flaunt them the next time they asked for a raise.

While women shooters have their own magazine, *Women and Guns*, it’s not easily found on your local newsstand. The image of a traditionally nurturing female bearing arms still scares many people – although Paxton Quigley’s unapologetically pro-gun book, *Armed and Female*, has remained in print since 1989.

Don’t rely on the mass media to discuss the issues in any depth. Many urban reporters and editors, certainly, have never shot, would consider the idea distasteful and know better than to pitch a piece that might paint gun-owners in anything but a negative light. New York City, home to the country’s largest and most powerful television, newspaper and magazine companies, also has the country’s toughest gun laws, significantly reducing the odds that media decision-makers, if they have ever shot, currently enjoy shooting or know much about guns. Most women’s magazines are run by women editors, many of them ignorant of, or squeamish about, this issue. Add to this, at the time of this writing, a recession in the publishing industry and a desperate scramble to woo, win and keep readers and risk-averse, deep-pocketed advertisers — and the odds of coverage favorable to gun-owners drop further.

The public, visible and vocal world of guns remains overwhelmingly male; even at 11 to 17 million, women represent only five to seven percent of American gunowners.

As Carol Oyster, a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Lacrosse, and fellow hunting enthusiast Mary Zeiss Stange, a professor of women’s studies at Skidmore College, quickly discovered when co-authoring their book on this subject, women remain largely absent from the national conversation on guns. While lobby groups on both sides of the debate fling statistics at one another, women’s voices are almost inaudible.

“We were intending to document the experiences of invisible women. Not only is it impossible to ascertain the precise number of women who own or have access or regularly use firearms, the extensive social-science literature on guns and their use almost invariably fails to take gender into account.” 14

You’ll also search in vain for women’s voices in academic journals on law, violence and criminology – a landmark edition of the Northwestern University School of Law, *Guns and Gun Violence*, contained only six women of 20 contributors. The annual “Shot Show”, the largest and most important gun industry trade show, attended by about 10,000 vendors and buyers, typically welcomes about 3,000 women. Although women work as instructors and salespeople for such major gun manufacturers as Colt, Glock and Beretta, only two women run gun manufacturing companies in the U.S. – Elizabeth Saunders, CEO of American Derringer, in Waco, TX, (founded by her late husband), and Kay Clark, CEO of Clark Custom Guns of Princeton, LA. (founded by her late father).

Guns whose names are household words, such as Remington, Glock, Browning, Ruger, Colt and Smith & Wesson are named for the men who invented them.

At a gun show with about 1,000 people a day packing the aisles in Springfield, Massachusetts, I gathered skeptical glances, so rare were women buyers or vendors at that event. Once people realized I was not “anti-gun,” and had shot and enjoyed it, they were happy to share their knowledge and experiences.

Yet an unbridgeable chasm separates those who enjoy guns and those who do not, preventing useful dialogue on thoughtful gun control or regulation. While the NRA officially represents gun owners, it takes a strong-armed stance, and some members tell me privately they long for more moderate language and a less-macho approach. Some female politicians are propelled to the forefront of the gun debate by personal tragedy – Suzanna Hupp, a pro-gun Texan whose parents were shot and killed, or gun-control advocate Rep. Carolyn McCarthy of Long Island, whose husband was killed and son wounded by a gunman on the commuter train.

Most often, though, regardless of gender, politicians simply toe the party line: Republicans favor gun ownership, Democrats gun-control. How and where do they get their information? Often from aides and consultants who, in turn, rely on gun-control groups or the NRA. Rarely is fresh data uncovered that is not immediately repackaged and spun in whatever direction seems most useful. Gun-control advocates aren't shy about telling gun owners what to do, while gun owners bristle at the temerity of those bossing them around who have little or no direct personal familiarity with guns.

When it comes to gun legislation, individual gun owners and gun-control advocates alike watch from the sidelines, both feeling frustrated and impotent.

When, if ever, should a woman consider buying a gun for self-protection?

Rape

Rape is the most under-reported crime in America; the government estimates that 17.7 million women are survivors of rape or attempted rape. That's about 20 percent of American women – **one in five**.

Rape survivors face a host of medical, psychological, emotional and professional problems, both immediately after their ordeal and many years later. A study published in the *Annals of Emergency Medicine* found that half of all women who are sexually assaulted are not given recommended treatments to prevent pregnancy or sexually-transmitted diseases. **15**

Effects linger for decades. In a study of 558 female military veterans, comparing a group who were victimized (physically assaulted, raped or both) with those who were not, those who were raped physically and physically assaulted did worst of all. Their general and mental health, pain, vitality and physical and social functioning were on par with those of people suffering from major chronic illnesses such as Parkinson's disease or diabetes. "More than a decade after rape or physical assault, women reported severely decreased health-related quality of life, with limitations of physical and emotional health," says Anne G. Sadler, R.N., Ph.D., the study's principal investigator. **16**

"Rape is not just a psychological problem; it's a social and public-health problem," says Kathleen Basile, Ph.D., a behavioral scientist in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's violence-prevention division. "It affects the physical and psychological health and well-being of half the population, and it's preventable." **17**

"The rapist took more than my confidence, self-esteem and sense of the world as a safe place," says writer Melissa Chessher, who was raped and stabbed near Fort Worth, Texas. "He stole the Technicolor out of my life." **18**

After many years of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, Chessher finally hired a personal trainer, learned to box and reclaimed her "power and strength."

What if she had never gotten raped at all?

But will owning a gun prevent a rape?

Women hoping to forestall rape – often a crime of opportunity – need to prepare physically and psychologically to fight back. "Attackers are not looking for partners to fight with when they pick a woman to attack," writes Gail Grove. **19**

"Men do not begin an attack on a woman thinking, 'I'm going to attack her and then she's going to hurt me.' Rather, they see women and girls as easy targets, weak and helpless."

Studies of rapists and other criminals have shown that they are most likely to choose women as victims on the assumption they are unarmed and/or unable or unwilling to fight back effectively.

"I don't advocate weapons under any circumstances," writes Frederic Storaska., former executive director of the National Organization for the Prevention of Rape and Assault. **20** Yet, he concedes: "The only weapon worth talking about is a handgun...Most important, do not become dependent on any weapon." If a woman feels she must have a gun, Storaska suggests keeping it in only two places, her home or her car. Those who decide to buy a gun, he cautions, must: 1) check with police to ensure they are legally able to own one; 2) train often and consistently in its use; 3) be absolutely ready to use it.

What about other self-defense methods? Some options, in addition to the **absolute last resort** of using a gun, include:

- Self-defense courses such as Model Mugging
- Tasers, which operate (only within a range of 20 feet) by delivering a shot of low-dosage electricity
- Pepper spray
- Tear gas
- Mace
- Manual self-defense
- Awareness of your surroundings, reading situations quickly and trusting your instincts
- A large, powerful dog

Older Women

Visibly vulnerable, many older women lack the necessary physical strength to respond effectively to attack. When, in the early 1980s, 26-year-old writer Pat Moore disguised herself to experience life as an 80-year-old woman in New York City, her most indelible emotion was fear, especially after she was mugged. "A frail woman bent over by osteoporosis – it's hard for her not to look weak and vulnerable. It's hard not to look frightened because you **are** frightened in that situation." **21**

For frail older women and those with disabilities, one-on-one, hand-to-hand self-defense methods are simply impractical.

Elderly women are more likely to have their purses stolen; for elderly people of both sexes, burglary, household larceny and motor vehicle theft are most common.

When the elderly do become crime victims, it's most often in or near their homes. Single elderly people are most vulnerable; in later life as earlier, members of racial minorities are more often victimized than elderly whites.

One reason for stopping an attack before it starts -- older victims are more likely to suffer serious injury that requires medical attention.

The good news? Statistically, older women – despite their high level of **fear** of crime – remain at relatively low risk. Those over the age of 65 make up only **two percent of crime victims**, with that rate dropping after the age of 75. **22** And elderly women are even less likely than men to become crime victims, especially violent crimes perpetrated by strangers.

Black Women

Black women, in particular, feel the brunt of gun use and gun violence. With crime highest amongst young black men, low-income and even middle-class black women – whether in big cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Houston, or smaller but equally-deadly centers like New Orleans -- live in daily intimacy with guns, drive-by shootings, gang and turf wars. Even if they live safely distant from a ghetto or public housing project, friends, schoolmates and relatives may not.

Dale Atkins, a black woman running for District Attorney in New Orleans, had barely kicked off her 2002 campaign when a random bullet from a driveby gang shooting killed her sister – sitting on the

family's front porch after the funeral of another relative who had been shot. From earliest childhood, black women are hurt disproportionately by gun violence, losing a progression of fathers and friends, husbands, sons and boyfriends. Emergency room nurses and physicians across the U.S. witness the carnage firsthand, racing to patch, stitch or declare dead body after shattered body, almost all of them black, male and young.

According to the Congress on Racial Equality, the small, cheap guns known as Saturday night specials are most often bought for self-defense by poor people – especially poor black women. With the high percentage of households headed by single black women in public housing, arguably one of the most dangerous places in which to live and raise children, you might expect to find women residents buying handguns for their own protection. Yet, under HUD regulations, residents of public housing are forbidden to own firearms.

Not only are black women more likely to live and work in dangerous neighborhoods, they're prey to violence through their relationships to men who use guns. A three-month investigation by *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* reporter Elizabeth Maychak, conducted in 1997, found that the single most dangerous place to live in America for a black woman was Youngstown, Ohio, a working-class town of 90,000, that saw 70 murders of black women in one year. "A lot of these people weren't the intended victims. They're just the victims of circumstance," said Youngstown police Capt. Robert Kane. (Other counties with the widest racial disparities in murder rates after Youngstown were Fresno County, CA. Lake County, IN. (home to Gary), and Washington, D.C.) **23**

Yet much gun-control advocacy still comes from women, and men, whose income, race, marital status or neighborhood protect them from any threat of real violence. Such high-profile and vociferous advocates of gun control as actresses Rosie O'Donnell and Meryl Streep live in wealthy enclaves and, when traveling, can well afford to hire private bodyguards, relieving them of the politically messy consequences of arming themselves.

"The generally anti-gun tenor of mainstream feminism reflects, and is to a large degree insulated by, a comfortably middle-class, white perspective. It is surely easier to forswear violent resistance if one belongs to a group less likely to fall prey to violent attack. According to Bureau of Justice statistics...certain women are far more vulnerable than others, [including]: women aged 20-24, African-American women, divorced, separated or single women, urban dwellers, women who never graduated from high school, and women who earn less than \$10,000 a year. Women of color and poor women, many of whom share several of these risk factors, seldom have the luxury of debating about whether the Master's house can be dismantled using the Master's tools. **24**

There's another issue. You won't find it discussed in journals or on talk shows, but it came up in private conversation with women of all ages, and often from those who publicly profess liberal views.

Rage.

Some women offer politically-correct gun-control positions on the record, laugh nervously, then guiltily admit how personally seductive a gun might be. Their true trepidation is **not** their distaste for, or potential incompetence with, a deadly weapon, but the opposite --- that owning a powerful method of potential redress might somehow tap into or unleash years of fury and frustration.

No matter their income level or education, women spend decades ignoring or minimizing male aggression and hostility: lipsmacking noises from strangers in the street, the "accidental" hand brushing against your breast, thigh or buttocks in a crowded bus or bar, the manager who always leans in just a little too close.

If we haven't already become crime victims ourselves ---- and I experienced four crimes, (burglary, assault, auto theft and fraud) by the age of 45 – we know a woman who has. We smile, swallow our retorts or fail to alert police, often to avoid the public humiliation or frustration of a trial, and try to pretend we don't care.

Oh, but we do.

Most women realize that shifting a manual transmission on a steep hill, or changing the diaper on a wriggling infant, is physically more difficult than pulling a trigger. Not buying a gun simply ensures they

can warily circle that pent-up rage, avoiding the allure of a dangerously definitive way to express it. Several women I interviewed told me point-blank -- they don't want to own a gun because they **know** how angry they are.

Remember Lorena Bobbitt, the wife who sliced off her husband's penis with a kitchen knife and tossed it into a field?

"The widespread understanding among women of Lorena Bobbitt's act, even as one feminist spokesman after another publicly condemned it, reveals a certain off-the-record vein of vengefulness, a mother lode of anger, a vast buildup of unrequited insults and injuries," wrote Ann Jones in *Ms.* **25**

"Mostly we pretend it's not there. We're ladylike and polite. But there it is, welling up from time to time when you least expect it. Women exchange high fives in the street when Lorena Bobbitt is acquitted. Women cheer in the movie theater when Louise pulls the trigger on that scumbag wanna-be rapist [in the 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*. It's a lot like living on an emotional fault line; we go along calmly and then one, day, boom, some little incident sets us quaking with laughter that smacks of sweet revenge."

Says Michelle Dubos, a white upper-class New Orleans accountant, "I don't want to find out about myself, so I don't want to buy a gun." Dubos sees a double standard -- after 30 years of feminism, some men no longer feel much compunction to protect women, yet neither are they comfortable knowing a woman can protect herself without male help. "The white man keeps looking over his shoulder for the black man, but he should look for the white woman -- because they're pissed."

A liberal New York writer in her early 30s, encountering her boyfriend's gun, found herself entangled in a welter of powerful feelings:

"As someone who has always been very anti-gun, I had a rather startling response to weapons a few years back when I started to date a police detective. The first few times that I caught a glimpse of his gun in his holster under his jacket, I was startled. I found it rather sexy.

And, once I admitted that thought to myself, I was enraged. 'How could I find a weapon sexy?' This was a question I asked myself over and over again.

As I continued to date him, I found myself secretly intrigued by the gun. Whenever he got home after work, he would lock his gun away. I found myself wanting to be around just to see him do that. Once, I told him that the gun was interesting to me and I asked him if I could hold it. He made sure it was locked and then put it in my hand. I was overwhelmingly surprised at the weight of the piece and the idea that such a simple tool could cause such horrible damage when fired.

I handed it back to him and never touched the gun again. The sensation of holding the weapon -- even momentarily -- is one I will never forget. It was cold, yet hot. Heavy and powerful. My hand did not feel large enough to grasp it, but I did not want to clutch it too tightly. I thought about a hundred things in the brief moment the gun was in my hand. Wars, drive-by shootings, police officers defending citizens, crazy men who terrorize their wives. I did not hold it for too long. I really don't want to touch one again. I think they belong in the hands of police officers and members of the military, not in the possession of ordinary citizens."

Even if they never own or touch one, many women admit to powerful, mixed emotions regarding guns. Dubos, the New Orleans accountant, is fascinated by women who kill. "For a woman to commit an act like that is even more violent [than a man] because you're going against what society has taught you." As someone who knows women who have lost friends or siblings to gun violence, hers is no idle fantasy.

Dubos was so outraged when a local gallery presented a show of artworks using guns that in reply she staged her own show, *Feminine Protection*, using items such as tampons and vibrators; 50 artists from around the world contributed.

Yet it was less the gun itself than the macho assumption that the gun, and its power, remain a male preserve, that riled her. She easily concedes their appeal. "So many of the women I talk to are getting a gun for self-protection. This has been going on for years. Women are often afraid of guns, afraid of the fact that, deep down inside, they may use it. That's a real thing with the women I've talked to over the years. Women joke about it, but there's a real fear that they'd use it."

Dubos says she knows a dozen college-educated professional women who feel this way. She also says that black women face a far different reality.

“It’s a different issue for them. In the African-American community there **are** more guns. There’s more access to guns. It’s more of a reality for them.”

“For a white woman, it’s more of a big deal. It’s something we’re not supposed to do. My Dad had a rifle but it was never considered that a girl would have a gun. Guns were in the male world, not the female world.” She only knew that her father’s rifle was kept in the closet, “an object of fascination.”

Language complicates the conversation. For those who oppose guns, the preferred term is “weapon,” implying aggression, violence and destruction. For those who enjoy guns, or use them professionally, it is “firearm,” a technical word whose end-use remains neutral.

It’s reminiscent of the irresolvable debate over abortion, whether one aborts a fetus or kills an unborn child. The fundamental issues for women, especially – choice, self-determination, valuing one’s life over that of another -- are not dissimilar. Terminating a pregnancy and firing a gun in self-defense are final, zero-sum acts of desperation, the last link in a chain of accident, poor choices or bad luck.

Both solutions are choices no woman wants to face, both forcing personal, political and lifechanging decisions.

Ending a pregnancy, a private decision, affects the woman, the erstwhile father and the unborn child. Buying a gun tosses a boulder into the pond of community, the ripples of consequence growing ever larger as they potentially extend far beyond your nightstand or gun safe. They touch your husband, boyfriend or lover. Their friends. Your room-mate. Their friends. Your friends. Your children, stepchildren, grandchildren, and their friends. Their schoolmates and teachers.

Women are still largely valued, and value themselves, for their ability to create and nurture close relationships. It is they who are most often expected to set an example, to inculcate and uphold moral values, to teach their children well. The greatest gift a woman can make is still one of self-sacrifice – ferrying the kids to soccer/ballet/Boy Scouts; working a split shift to be able to put them to bed; skipping sleep to efficiently handle the “second shift” that writer Arlie Hochschild calls the extra household duties many full-time working mothers also assume at day’s end; struggling to care for aging parents as part of the “sandwich” generation caught between the competing needs of children and elders.

Owning a gun and storing it safely – while keeping it accessible and useful in time of need – always presents a significant social responsibility.

How, then, can a woman remain responsible to herself, to her own perceived need to feel safe and protected, (or simply enjoy owning a gun for hunting or sport), **and** the competing needs of her intimates? Perhaps this is why so many women, still, enter gun ownership **not** through the advice, wisdom and experience of other women but, most often, through that of men.

Do we really, still, need their permission?

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