

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and this is Empowered Health.

Shannon Watts: I never imagined that I would create something that would become so large and so effective, but I guess that is in many ways the power of type A women. I was folding laundry and my home in Indiana. I lived in a suburb right outside of Indianapolis at the time. I had five kids that were in elementary through college in 2012. As you can imagine, folding laundry is a full time job, and I was watching TV. I saw the news start to come in that there had been [a shooting tragedy in a town called Newtown, Connecticut](#)¹, a town I had never heard of. And I was looking at the anguished faces of families in the parking lot of the school, of law enforcement that were talking, even the pundits and the anchors on television, and I just looked up and said, please don't let this be as bad as it seems. And as we all knew now, it was a million times worse than really anyone can fathom. Even this many years later that 20 children and six educators would be slaughtered in the sanctity of an American elementary school. I thought, I've got to do something. I want to join something like [Mothers Against Drunk Driving](#)². That was so pivotal to me as a teen in the 80s and I went online and really all I found were think tanks run by men, um, state one-off organizations, also mostly run by men. And I knew I wanted to be part of a badass army of women. So I thought I will try to find this, this group of women online. I started [a Facebook page](#)³. I called out one million moms for gun control, not realizing that one million moms was an anti gay group that [didn't want Ellen Degeneres to be the JC Penney spokeswoman](#)⁴, and not realizing that gun control was a phrase that was really verboten in political circles. But I didn't have a focus group in my kitchen and it was like lightning in a bottle. There were so many other mothers and women in particular who had that exact same idea that day, which was it was time to get off the sidelines. We did change our name, but over the next weeks and months we just, we grew exponentially in every single state across the country.

Emily: That was [Shannon Watts](#)⁵, the founder of [Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America](#)⁶. I'm excited to talk to her for a number of reasons. One of which is the United States gun violence from my perspective is so out of control that even Amnesty International in I think August of last summer [issued](#)

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<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/gunman-kills-students-and-adults-at-newtown-connecticut-elementary-school>

² <https://www.madd.org/>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/MomsDemandAction/>

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ellendegeneres/one-million-moms-to-jc-penney-fire-ellen-shes-gay-idUSTRE8111Q420120202>

⁵ <https://momsdemandaction.org/shannon-watts/>

⁶ <https://momsdemandaction.org/>

[a warning](#)⁷ that was basically an international travel warning to people traveling to the United States saying that it's a dangerous place and that you should avoid public areas because of all of these shootings. So this is the kind of issue that I think we get really polarized about in the United States and people feel really strongly one way or another that the international community has pretty clearly said like the United States is now a dangerous place to visit because of gun violence. We're going to talk to probably one of the foremost experts on mobilizing moms specifically, but now it's become a huge organization, to actually try to demand some change on gun violence in America. Let's talk a little bit about the name, which is moms demand action for gun sense in America. Gun sense is such an interesting phrase or is such a turn of words. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Shannon Watts: We had been saying "moms demand action" that are marches and rallies. So for us, that's where that piece of it came. The gun sense in America was this idea that really what we're talking about is common sense. We're not anti-gun, we're not against the second amendment. Many of our volunteers are gun owners or their partners are gun owners. This is really just about restoring the responsibilities that should go along with gun rights. And so gun sense is this idea of common sense that what we're asking for is something that the majority of Americans support. It's proven by research and data to save lives and it should be implemented across the country.

Emily: And so what does that look like? Like for a typical American, sending their kids to school or going into their office and feeling safe again? What are the kinds of performs that we need to have in order for that to have it?

Shannon Watts: Well, first of all, a [background check](#)⁸ on every gun sale. This is foundational to gun safety in this country. Only 21 states require a background check on what are called unlicensed gun sales. So those are sales either at gun shows or arranged online. And then done in person. No questions asked. The federal law does not require unlicensed gun sales to have a background check and that is a loophole that needs to be closed or we're doing it state by state, but we really need Congress to do it at a federal level. When you look at states that have strong background check laws, [you see fewer gun deaths across the board](#)⁹, whether they're suicides or homicides. The same goes for something called a [red flag law](#)¹⁰. These are also laws found to be constitutionally sound by the courts and incredibly effective. Seventeen states

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<https://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/government-relations/advocacy/travel-advisory-united-states-of-america/>

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⁹ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/scorecard/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/us/red-flag-laws.html>

have passed a red flag law since about 2005 and 12 of those states since the Parkland shooting tragedy in 2018. A red flag law essentially allows either law enforcement or families to get a temporary restraining order from a judge that removes the guns from someone who seems to be a danger to themselves or others until law enforcement can figure out what's going on. And these have been found to be incredibly effective in domestic gun violence incidents, gun suicides, and interrupting plans for mass gun violence. And then the third law that we work on, and in fact [we've passed laws in 28 states that disarm domestic abusers](#)¹¹. Federal law does not [include stalkers or dating partners](#)¹² and the definition of a prohibited purchaser. And so we have to go state by state and broaden that definition, but also put teeth in the law that removes the guns from someone who has been convicted of domestic abuse. It's not enough to just prohibit them from buying more. So again, these are things that the vast majority of Americans, regardless of political parties believe should be implemented.

Emily: So what is the pushback? I mean, I'm sure you know exactly what the counter argument is.

Shannon Watts: Mhm, yes, it's always really based on NRA rhetoric and misinformation and that's that any law whatsoever is an infringement on the second amendment that somehow these laws are not constitutional, that they're removing people's rights, that it's a slippery slope to confiscation or undoing the second amendment. And none of those things are true. And in fact, when you look at [States that have strong gun laws, you see fewer gun deaths](#)¹³. A state like [California](#)¹⁴, which has the highest gun sales of any state in this country, but it also has incredibly strong gun laws.

Emily: You mean it's not prohibitive essentially, which is like there is this sort of like fear culture that like once any of this stuff gets enacted, somebody is going to come and take like all of my dad's guns away and he's just like, go hunting once a year and so "what's the big deal" kind of a thing.

Shannon Watts: That's right. Most gun owners are legal and law abiding and these laws will not impact them. Right. They're not concerned about getting a background check. They aren't going to use their guns against themselves or someone else. They're not prohibited purchasers because of domestic abuse. Those are not responsible gun owners. And that's why [90 percent of Americans](#)

¹¹ <https://momsdemandaction.org/work/pass-the-violence-against-women-act/>

¹² <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/who-can-have-a-gun/domestic-violence-firearms/>

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/the-states-with-the-most-gun-laws-see-the-fewest-gun-related-deaths/448044/>

¹⁴ <https://calmatters.org/health/2018/11/california-lower-death-rate-gun-control/>

¹⁵, [about 80 percent of gun owners and even 74 percent of NRA](#) ¹⁶members support these laws.

Emily: And then you've also done a lot of work with corporations like Starbucks comes to mind, sort of trying to have them put their foot down. Dick's Sporting Good was another one that [made big headlines](#)¹⁷ a couple of years ago. Can you talk a little bit about that? I know that there's a story that you've told of a group of moms sitting in a Starbucks and looking out the window. Can you tell that story?

Shannon Watts: Yeah. So back in 2013 we realized that a lot of this work would be playing defense at a state level and at a federal level. We also realized that corporations and influencers impact the culture and that they impact lawmakers. And I can remember watching the news again in 2013 and seeing that [Starbucks was going to stop allowing smoking and even cigarettes about 20 feet outside their stores](#)¹⁸, regardless of state law. And they had been allowing something called open carry inside their stores. [Open carry is legal in 45 states](#)¹⁹. It's mostly unregulated in many of those states and essentially allows someone to carry a long gun, like an AR-15 out into public with no background check, no training, no permitting. We saw this happening at Starbucks stores. I called them and I said, I see what you're doing with smoking when you do the same for guns? And they said, no, we'll continue to follow state laws as it pertains to guns. So we were so small, we were only about six months old, but we [started this campaign](#)²⁰, we called it a momcott, using the hashtag #SkipStarbucksSaturdays. We showed pictures of where we were having Starbucks or I'm sorry, where we were having coffee inside a competitor stores. And we also made images of open carry inside Starbucks go viral across the country. And the more we pushed on this, the more gun extremist pushed back and they started showing up everywhere across the country. I can remember in Sioux Falls [over a dozen people with handguns and](#)

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[https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2017/oct/03/chris-abele/do-90-americans-support-background-checks-all-gun-/](https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2017/oct/03/chris-abele/do-90-americans-support-background-checks-all-gun/)

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<https://www.americanprogress.org/press/release/2015/11/17/125618/release-gun-owners-overwhelmingly-support-background-checks-see-nra-as-out-of-touch-new-poll-finds/>

¹⁷<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/business/walmart-and-dicks-major-gun-retailers-will-tighten-rules-on-guns-they-sell.html>

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<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/05/31/187532646/no-smoking-outside-starbucks-shops-starting-saturday>

¹⁹ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/open-carry/>

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<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/08/21/starbucks-boycott-gun-control-group/2681203/>

[semi-automatic rifles showed up](#)²¹ and terrified customers. [Even in Newtown, Connecticut](#)²², they showed up at a Starbucks and within three months the [CEO Howard Schultz came out](#) and said, "guns are no longer welcome inside our stores." And we realized that even though [women only make up about 17 percent of the 500,000 elected positions](#)²³ (**Editor's note: this percent has risen as of 2019**) in this country, [we make about 80 percent of the spending decisions for our families](#)²⁴. And this, this corporate work gave us a lot of power.

Emily: Totally. I love that. I feel like I'm sometimes asked to give talks to female entrepreneurs and I always sort of say when people, you know, sort of resist that there is some new product that you know, very often women are starting businesses that cater to other women. And I think there is this misunderstanding about how much purchase power women possess in this country and how mobilizing that really can make a business successful in ways that is kind of, I dunno, it doesn't seem very tangible to most people, but it's right there. I mean it's like we make decisions about, I mean, I buy everything for my husband. I don't think, maybe he buys like a tee shirt once a year. Like that's it.

Shannon Watts: And if you look at how we've been able to harness that power, you know, we started with Starbucks, but dozens and dozens of major restaurants and retailers have followed suit simply because of the hashtag. For example, groceries, not guns.

Emily: Mhm.

Shannon Watts: This last summer after the mass shootings in [Dayton](#)²⁵ and [El Paso](#)²⁶, we had been in conversations with Walmart about their open carry policy. They came out and [said that they would no longer allow open carry](#)²⁷ and then [using the hashtag #GroceriesNotGuns](#)²⁸ we put pressure on other retailers and grocers and within just a few weeks over 40 of them, everything

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2013/08/12/latte-with-an-extra-shot-as-gun-lovers-hold-armed-rallies-at-starbucks-howard-schultz-faces-call-to-ban-weapons/#271adc524035>

22 <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/10/nyregion/gun-rights-celebration-at-starbucks-not-in-newtown.html>

23 <https://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-elective-office-2018>

24 <https://girlpowermarketing.com/statistics-purchasing-power-women/>

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<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/08/14/dayton-ohio-shooting-video-gunman-path/2006057001/>

26 <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/10/769013051/el-paso-walmart-shooting-suspect-pleads-not-guilty>

27 <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/9/18/20870798/walmart-shootings-open-carry-kroger-cvs>

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http://groceriesnotguns.com/?source=prno_gng-video&utm_source=pr_n_&utm_medium=s&utm_campaign=gng-video

from CVS to Walgreens to Wegmans, to major, major grocery chains also changed their open carry policies. And that was all just women on Twitter.

Emily: Mhm. Now there's two parts to this that I feel like I want to clarify. One is in [some states at least you have to have a permit to conceal a weapon](#)²⁹

Shannon Watts: That's right.

Emily: So how does that work in terms of like open carry versus concealed weapons? So like if you can't go into Starbucks with your weapons showing, can you stick it in your pocket or it means like no guns are allowed.

Shannon Watts: The few things, first of all, [open carry of long guns is mostly unregulated in the States where it's allowed](#)³⁰. So the permitting process does not necessarily apply to long guns to just hand guns. So you can take an AR-15 into the public square, but not necessarily your hand gun without a permit. The other piece of this is that the NRA is working to undo the permitting process. They spent decades building this permitting process up. So they wanted you to be able to conceal, carry a handgun anywhere you wanted in any state. And for the most part they got what they wanted and then they realized, oh we don't even need, we don't want them to have to have a permit. So let's tear this system down. And in now around 15 states have passed something called [permitless carry](#)³¹ and that allows people to take hidden, loaded handguns into public with no background check permit or training required.

Emily: I mean it sounds terrifying. And I think living in Massachusetts, I feel somewhat of like a wimp for, you know, not being exposed to this stuff in the same way. But I used to live in Las Vegas and when I was there you never saw people walking around with handguns. And apparently now it's like commonplace because the gun laws have changed so much and that there's just sort of this, because there is this sort of open carry society and apparently now a big draw to the strip is like all of these semi automatic weapons that you can go shoot off at various gun ranges. So like, you know, you go for your bachelor party or bachelorette party and then you go and shoot a bunch of like really serious weapons off. And my understanding from reporters who I am still close with who I knew when I was out there, it's just like [a completely, completely different thing](#)³². And that when there was that mass shooting in

²⁹ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/concealed-carry/>

³⁰ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/open-carry/>

³¹ <https://everytownresearch.org/permitless-carry/>

³²

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/vegas-used-to-be-the-safest-place-to-get-drunk_b_59dbf3eae4b0b34afa5ba84d

Vegas, not very many people were surprised. I was shocked. But they basically sort of tried to reeducate me that this is, you know, the landscape has changed politically so dramatically since I was there and that the guns are a huge part of that and that people... I mean this one friend of mine says like, he goes to the supermarket and every time he sees somebody with like a semiautomatic weapon and I'm like, that's insane to me. I mean, that feels like being in a... I lived in Italy when I was in high school for a year, and it took me a while to get used to the fact that the police carried big guns around, you know, like you get on the subway and you'd see somebody with a big weapon and was like definitely disturbing. And I think there's just a level of anxiety, right? I mean, it's like I get that the people on the other side of this argument are saying, you know, we're providing security, but what they're really doing, I mean, that's pretty threatening, right? To see something like that. And I think just as a culture, we're all very aware of sending our kids to school in a way that I don't think my mom ever worried about. And then to have this be this, you know, I mean, I can imagine in some ways that their idea of kind of responding to your call out yes. To boycott Starbucks. Like they, they thought they would be more threatening to you and that you guys would shut up. But ultimately the image, which you have been very skillful, I think, at using, is very powerful because it creates a power dynamic that everybody palpably responds to when they see it, whether they're actually physically in that location or they're witnessing it on Twitter. Right.

Shannon Watts: It's a really interesting dynamic. So back when I started this work, the NRA opposed open carry, [they called it downright weird](#)³³. And then because they are pulled so far to the right by these small state gun groups, for example, when I was in Colorado, the group there was called [Rocky Mountain Gun Owners](#)³⁴. And they believe any law whatsoever is an infringement on the second amendment. And they have pulled the NRA to the right to the point where they now support and even encourage open carry. And this is really backlashed by gun extremists who say any right, not exercised as a right lost. And so we're going to intimidate and silence people and that's our right to do so. And we're seeing that in Virginia where we helped [flip both chambers of the general assembly in November to be gun sense majorities](#).³⁵ Right now they are passing stronger gun laws in the state and these gun extremists are showing up from all across the country [in Virginia on January](#)

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<https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/nra-calls-texas-open-carry-protests-downright-weird-and-just-not-neighborly-7143106>

³⁴ <https://rmgo.org/>

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<https://momsdemandaction.org/gun-safety-sweep-in-virginia-everytown-for-gun-safetys-2-5-million-investment-and-moms-demand-actions-grassroots-army-flip-general-assembly-to-a-gun-sense-majority-creating-a-road/>

20th³⁶ and they can open carry long guns with no background checks, no training, no permit. It's an incredibly dangerous situation. The other point you brought up, I think that's really important is to remember we are all only as safe as the closest state with the weakest gun laws. So you're in Massachusetts where [many guns come from states with lax gun laws like Vermont and New Hampshire](#)³⁷. And for a long time the guns, [the crime guns in California came from Nevada](#)³⁸. Nevada is a really interesting situation because we worked very hard for many years to change the makeup of the state legislature, which we did. We changed the governor and [he passed sweeping gun reform legislation last year](#)³⁹. All of that is going into effect this year and some of it last year. And so background checks, a red flag law, disarming domestic abusers, all these different new laws in Nevada will keep the states around it safer, not just Nevadans.

Emily: Well, and so that's sort of the part where, you know with interstate commerce you'd think that would be a no brainer for Congress, right? Like to jump in and sort of say, we've got these guns moving from one state to the next and therefore it supersedes state law.

Shannon Watts: Yes, that's right. And the [NRA, we have to remember gave about \\$30 million dollars to Donald Trump's campaign](#)⁴⁰ thinking they would turn around and pass their priority legislation, which is [deregulating silencers](#)⁴¹ and something called [concealed carry reciprocity](#)⁴². What that means is that the lowest common denominator to get a permit, for example, in a state like Alabama, maybe you don't have any live fire training or you have violence in your background or drunk driving and you can get a permit very easily. Then you can take that permit into any other state like Massachusetts. That's the NRA's dream. It's a public safety nightmare. And we have gotten so good at playing defense that even with a Republican president and a Republican Congress, the NRA was not able to pass their legislation.

Emily: Okay. So tell me a little bit about how that all goes down and what is that like for you on a personal level? Because I feel like this is a terrible comparison, but it's the first one that's coming to mind, so bear with me, but like going back to this Moms Against Drunk Driving thing, there was never a cohort of people who were like, screw you, it's my right to drunk drive. Right? Like

³⁶ <https://wsbt.com/news/nation-world/virginias-capital-braces-for-gun-rights-rally-01-20-2020>

³⁷ <https://www.wbur.org/news/2014/02/24/gun-trafficking-into-massachusetts>

³⁸ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-25/california-law-enforcement-gun-shows-nevada>

³⁹

<https://everytown.org/press/victory-for-gun-sense-following-landmark-legislative-session-for-gun-safety-governor-sisolak-signs-ab291-with-strong-school-safety-and-mass-shooting-prevention-measures/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/recips.php?cmte=National+Rifle+Assn&cycle=2016>

⁴¹ <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr3668/BILLS-115hr3668ih.pdf>

⁴² <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/115/hr38>

there may have been people who were like, hey, I like to have some, you know, four glasses of wine and that's questionable. Like there was maybe gray area, but I don't know that that group ever got threats against them or was dealing with something where they were worried that someone was going to, you know, intentionally drink too much and drive over them. Right?

Shannon Watts: Well, it's funny because I've done some research on the parallels and yes, they did get a lot of blow back and they were, you know, derided and called horrible names and, and people pushed back in op-eds and in the media, but to your point, their opponents weren't armed and there was no social media to threaten them. And so it is a very different landscape this many years later. And I, you know, I just, we're going up against the wealthiest and the most powerful lobby that has ever existed. You have to remember what the key demographic is for an NRA member. And that's a white man over the age of 60. It's a demographic that is aging out. And in many ways we're seeing the last gasp of power. And I think that this backlash is to be expected, but the volunteers are Moms Demand Action are not going to back down. They're not going to be silenced. They're not going to be intimidated. You know, if we lose our children, we have nothing left to lose. So the NRA has finally met its match for a long time. This was David versus Goliath, but I really do think at this point we are winning.

Emily: I feel like just to continue with that a little bit, you also have a background in communications. I'm sure that that has provided, you know, a lot of really helpful tools for you. I mean, just as a journalist, right? Like I can say like developing the right messaging and targeting your audience properly and all of that stuff. How much credibility do you give to that in terms of mobilizing people? Because that's what the NRA has been really, I mean, I feel like that's why no one's been able to challenge them is because their messaging has been so strong. I mean as like just sort of a side note, a million years ago when I used to smoke and they started saying like, oh, you can't smoke at restaurants, you have to go to the bar. Right. And my now husband, who has never been a smoker was like, you know, you guys are going to lose your rights. You have to do what the NRA does, which is like, oh yeah, you say, I can't smoke in here. Guess what? Like I'm gonna smoke two cigarettes at once. And we thought it was like the funniest thing, but he was like, eventually they're going to tell you like you have to go outside. And we would be like in the winter, like no one's going to go smoke outside. Well sure enough, he was absolutely right. Right. And I think that sort of, I mean, and it was a public health benefit, right? Like no one's arguing that that was the wrong move or that we should all be smoking again. Right. We wish we could go back and never have done that.

Shannon Watts: Yup.

Emily: But it's an interesting one because I think that has been the strategy, right? And it's almost so transparent. It's like, Oh, you're going to ask for an inch, then we're going to, you know, see your inch and demand these, you know, silenc--who's going in favor of silencers? Like, I mean, I just, it's really hard to make that argument. Yup. And so I sort of from the communication side of it, I think it's fascinating, right? Because this is sort of a messaging war. Nobody wants dead kids, right? Like nobody's, I can't imagine anybody who's in favor of that. Right. But it gets into this nuance of like your individual rights?

Shannon Watts: Yes, exactly. And the NRA has been very good at that for decades. The messaging, the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012 that's why that was such a pivotal moment. The NRA had a choice. They could double down or they could back down. And we all know that they doubled down. That was [Wayne LaPierre's infamous speech](#)⁴³ about the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. And came out with sort of this crazy, unbelievable rhetoric that showed the direction that they were going to go in as an organization. And some staff who've now let the NRA have said, you know, [we argued internally about which direction to go in](#)⁴⁴ and they want, and for us as mothers and women in this country and you know, we're mothers and others now, there are a lot of men that have joined our organization, but it was a pivotal moment for us too, which is are we going to allow school shootings and shootings in our communities? And this idea of everyone... guns for anyone, anywhere, no questions asked, are we going to let that become the norm? And I really do think the NRA's worst nightmare was that women and moms would organize against them. Clearly my background in public relations and communications helped craft the message and tell the story of who we were. I worked at General Electric for a long time. I know how to create a brand, and created one that was very powerful and empowering along with the help of volunteers who brought skillsets to the table that I never had and never will, you know, whether it was web development or legal acumen or policy know-how or organizing, all of those things were brought to the table by perfect strangers who cared as much as I did about this issue. And some of it's lightning in a bottle. If you asked me to go back and recreate this for another issue, I don't think I could.

Emily: Mhm.

⁴³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aASfk-ii0BM>

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/newtown-massacre-divided-nra-leaders-foreshadowing-split-to-come/2019/07/03/40c45d82-9757-11e9-916d-9c61607d8190_story.html

Shannon Watts: But here we are seven years later, we tripled in size after the Parkland tragedy because so many more people decided they'd get off the sidelines. But it isn't just those Americans impacted by gun violence are scared of gun violence because of a mass shooting. It's also the daily gun violence that takes its toll on communities that get people involved and young moms who send their kids to school and they have to participate in these lockdown drills. I mean we grow exponentially every year.

Emily: I think that's also the big weakness in the NRA's decision to double down, as you say, is what does that mean? A good guy with a gun is the only answer? So we're going to start putting good guys with guns everywhere? Like that's not a landscape any of us wants either.

Shannon Watts: No, but they do because it profits them, right? If criminals have guns and everyone is, we're all scared that the criminals have guns. So we buy guns that benefits the gun lobby.

Emily: So talk to me a little bit about the money because I think that's a really important part of this. We hear a lot about how the [NRA donates to campaigns and that they, you know, not just a little bit but significantly and also will, you know, sort of counter invest in somebody who's anti-gun](#)⁴⁵ will double down on supporting the opponent to that person to make it harder for that person to win. Right? So there's a lot of different ways that they use money to sort of influence politics, but you know that much better than I do. So can you talk a little bit about like, is that influence as real as it is made out to be and how do you counter that?

Shannon Watts: Yeah, so the NRA has built up this reputation as being all powerful. That has really dwindled since about 2010. However, they do have about a \$350 million annual budget. [Most of it supplied not by members, but by gun manufacturers](#)⁴⁶ (EDITOR'S NOTE: Reports have found that the NRA is mainly funded by member donations.) They could have no members and still be incredibly wealthy. And they use that money in, election cycles to reward the lawmakers who do their bidding. But also they use it to threaten lawmakers that they might primary, you know, in an election. There's a lot of fear tactics that they've made. Lawmakers are afraid to go against them. And the interesting thing that we saw in 2013, there was a voter in honor really of the Sandy Hook tragedy on a bill called [Manchin-Toomey](#)⁴⁷. And it was a bill that would have closed the background check loophole I mentioned earlier at a federal level. And it failed by just a handful of votes in the Senate. Some of those senators were Democrats. And the reason that they voted against it was because they

⁴⁵ <https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/recips.php?cmte=National+Rifle+Assn&cycle=2016>

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⁴⁷ <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/113th-congress/senate-amendment/715>

thought the NRA would have their back. And it was such an important lesson and I think it's why we are where we are now, which is that every democratic candidate running for president is competing to see who can be the best on this issue is because they realized with friends like the NRA, who needs enemies? Because the NRA went right back in and invested in their opponents, their Republican opponents. So the NRA has made a lot of bad gambles, their return on investments not paying off it like it used to. [In the 2018 midterm elections, we actually outspent them.](#)⁴⁸ which was a watershed moment for our movement.

Emily: I didn't know that, that's incredible.

Shannon Watts: We did, we outspent them. We elected over a thousand gun sense candidates in races across the country, including our former spokeswoman, Lucy McBath, who is [now a Congresswoman from Georgia](#)⁴⁹. On top of that, there was an election this last November in Virginia and we outspent the NRA eight to one in their own backyard. So again, they're weaker than they've ever been financially and reputationally and we are taking advantage of that.

Emily: And do you see any kind of reform or are they, they're really invested in this sort of hard line? I mean cause I think at some point they have to, if what you're saying is an accurate depiction of what's happening, which I think it is, you kinda think like they're going to go away. I mean like the whole, I feel like the public it seems is so outraged by these tragedies. And then add to that this idea of all these suicides, right? Which we know, I mean I feel like there's this really interesting anecdote of in England their suicide rate was whatever, let's just say hypothetically, you know, 25% of men, 18 to whatever it was, like very high rate. And then they got rid of the gas stoves in the house, I'm sure you know this, that the heating systems in the houses were mostly gas. And so it was really easy to kill yourself because you just seal up the house, open up the gas and that was it. [And when they replaced those in a lot of the housing, the suicide rate dropped](#)⁵⁰. So like more significantly than any other public health initiative you could think of and it was access. Right. And so in some ways I feel like that's such a direct, there's a direct parallel for me between something like that and access to guns, right?

Shannon Watts: Yup. We know that, I mean the United has a similar rate of suicide attempts as other high income countries. What we have is a much [higher rate of fatality](#)⁵¹ mainly because guns are so easily accessible in this

⁴⁸ <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2018/10/2018-gun-control-outspends-nra-rights/>

⁴⁹ <https://mcbath.house.gov/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/struck-living/201012/can-obstacle-prevent-suicide>

⁵¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26551975>

country. [400 million guns in the hands of civilians](#)⁵². But your question about the NRA's existence into the future is an interesting one. You know, they're under investigation on many different fronts. They're struggling financially and reputationally, but at the same time there's these state gun groups I mentioned that are to the right of them. And there are also national gun groups like the National Gun Owners Association and the [National Shooting Foundation](#)⁵³ and all of these national groups that are to the right of the NRA that are just waiting in the wings to replace them and they're even more extreme than the NRA is. So--

Emily: Wow.

Shannon Watts: Demographics may actually play a big role in this. We're getting more diverse. Populations are becoming more urban and suburban and the voter demographic is changing. So all of that will also have an impact on the gun lobby at large and whether they will have to moderate and come to the middle.

Emily: I mean I feel like, you know, again not knowing what the numbers are per se, but like as a gun manufacturer, you would think like this has been great, right? Like we can scare people into buying guns, we can have this sort of open legislation if there's no humanity involved and you're just looking at the numbers. Right? But then on the flip side, you could say like, this has gone so far that we're going to now business is really at risk. Right? Whereas if we put in some sort of like, you know, they have all those, I've heard of all these gadgets that you can add to guns that mean that only the person who bought the gun who theoretically had a background check can use the gun. Right. And they haven't wanted to do any of that. But you sort of think like at some point there's gotta be a tipping point, like the [Laffer curve](#)⁵⁴, right? In economics where it's like you've gotten to a point where now you're going to start going over to the other side of the curve and it's going to start going down if you don't sort of self regulate in some way. Is it not there yet?

Shannon Watts: Well, I really do believe this was the NRA strategy. They would spend eight years of the Obama administration, terrifying people that their guns would be taken away. Right? It's how their annual budget went up over a hundred million dollars after the Sandy Hook tragedy, because they were able to sell guns. They exploited the tragedy to sell guns. And then they thought, okay, we'll elect Donald Trump and then we'll be able to pass all the legislation we wanted. So we will have been, we will have made all this money, we will get the laws that we want at a federal level, and then a Democrat will

⁵² <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/about-us/mission.html>

⁵³ <https://www.nssf.org/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/l/laffercurve.asp>

get elected and we'll be able to sell guns all over again. And it's this cycle, right, that benefits them. What they didn't count on was that Donald Trump's election would result in a, what we call a [Trump slump](#)⁵⁵. There were \$100 million in the hole on gun sales and accessory sales because every time there's a shooting tragedy in this country they can't convince people their guns will be taken away. So they're not buying guns like they used to. And on top of that, they're not able to pass the legislation they thought they would pass. And so they're really, you know, in a really bad place. And that's why we're really keeping our foot on their neck until we can there, you know, I always compare the, the NRA lobbyists to cockroaches. They will come back, they're still be around. And when there's a democratic president and or Congress, they will use that to make money again. But if we can make sure that we pass the laws we need and put in place that weaken them so that when they do make money, again, they just don't have the same power that they've had.

Emily: And so on a very practical front, somebody who maybe is listening who is saying, you know, I'm a gun owner and they're going to take this as a slippery slope to taking my rights away or whatever. What are the sort of best things that you can say to that person to convince them that they're looking at this from a biased angle or that like the background check isn't, like you sort of were saying before that like a lot of these regulations wouldn't actually impact somebody who is a responsible gun owner. Can you talk directly to that person for a minute?

Shannon Watts: Yeah. And I actually wrote a book this last year called ["Fight like a Mother."](#)⁵⁶ All the proceeds go to gun violence prevention organizations. And in it, I talk about each myth that we encounter and how to dispel it because it is really important to have a conversation based on on facts and data. But it's also important to remember that this country is not divided on this issue. Yes, it is polarizing but there is a [majority of Americans believe in stronger gun laws](#)⁵⁷. And so the question is do you have to convince gun extremists to be on our side? I'm not sure that we do. I mean we're winning election after election, but you do have friends and family who may not support the work that you're doing if you're working, you know, as a gun safety advocate. And so having these conversations based on fact and data and not misinformation and not rhetoric I think makes them go a lot more smoothly and effectively. You know, we do it all the time in, in state legislatures and that's

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-guns-sales/u-s-gun-sales-down-6-1-percent-in-2018-extending-trump-slump-idUSKCN1PN346>

⁵⁶ <https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062892560/fight-like-a-mother/>

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<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/16/share-of-americans-who-favor-stricter-gun-laws-has-increased-since-2017/>

why we are a nonpartisan, moderate research based organization because we do believe that law makers for the most part want to be on the right side of history. They want to be the on the right side of this issue. And many Republicans in the last seven years have come over to our side. We've seen it happen over and over again. Whether it's a change of heart and mind or whether it's political expediency, we don't really care as long as they're voting the right way.

Emily: And then let's just talk a little bit about this sort of, the ability for moms to get shit done. I mean, I think you've shown that we love to talk about that on this podcast. Just women in general who sort of maybe feel disenfranchised, can look at something what you have built and recognize that there is a real will behind female power that can drive change in a way that I think the most common narrative tries to put down.

Shannon Watts: Right. And I just, there's nothing more powerful than a mom on a mission. We've seen it over and over again throughout history. You know, even if you start to look at prohibition, because women really weren't allowed to be involved in activism [until men decided that temperance was a Christian value](#)⁵⁸. After women got involved in that, there was really no way to put the genie back in the bottle. And we've been on the front lines of activism from the civil rights movement and child labor laws all the way up to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. I really do think that we are the secret sauce to organizing in this country because when it comes to protecting our families and our children, there's really nothing we will let stand in our way. And I see that every day at Moms Demand Action and the fierceness and the fearlessness of our volunteers. I also, you know, I talked about my book "Fight like a Mother", I talk about how important it is to shape policy, but in many ways my book is a call to action that I want these women and moms to move to actually making policy. As the proverb goes, if you don't have a seat at the table, you are probably on the menu and the violence against women act is such a good example of that. That bill would close this [boyfriend loophole](#)⁵⁹ I mentioned, which makes it so easy for domestic abusers to get guns. The [NRA is grading lawmakers on it](#)⁶⁰ so they're not letting it go forward for a vote in the Senate and if we had more women lawmakers and more elected officials were women and moms, we wouldn't be in this situation. We have to protect ourselves, we have to protect our moms and our sisters and our daughters and that's why I just think it's so important and there's really a moral imperative right now in this country for moms to run for office.

⁵⁸ <http://prohibition.themobmuseum.org/the-history/the-road-to-prohibition/the-temperance-movement/>

⁵⁹ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/who-can-have-a-gun/domestic-violence-firearms/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/us/politics/nra-domestic-violence-congress.html>

Emily: Amen. I feel like that's a great place to wrap up. I have so much respect for all the work you guys are doing.

Shannon Watts: Oh, thank you, I appreciate it.

Emily: It's so necessary and I mean I think the thing for me is that it's just outrageous that it takes such a big effort in some ways to do what is clearly common sense. I mean I think it's just heartbreaking.

Shannon Watts: But the good news is we're winning and it's so important to remember that I travel all over the country and remind people that we are winning. You know, we have a 90 percent track record of stopping bad NRA bills in state legislatures every year. In 2019 [we passed stronger gun laws in 18 states, red, blue and purple](#).⁶¹ We are making huge, significant headway. I really do believe it's just a matter of several election cycles till we get the changes we need and then it'll all be about protecting those wins.

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and that was Empowered Health. Thanks for joining us. Don't forget to check out our website at empoweredhealthshow.com. For all the show notes, links to everything that was mentioned in the episode as well as a chance to sign up for our newsletter and get some extra fun tidbits. See you next week.

⁶¹ <https://momsdemandaction.org/about/victories/>