

Advance Praise for *Fight Like a Mother*

“Too many mothers have been tragically impacted by gun violence, and yet they courageously turn their grief and frustration into action. I’m honored to fight alongside them, working in the Congress to pass effective, common-sense gun violence prevention reforms, and I’m so glad Shannon Watts has written this book and provided a road map for other everyday activists to make a difference.”

– *Speaker Nancy Pelosi*

“There’s never been more energy behind America’s gun safety movement than there is today, and Shannon Watts and Moms Demand Action are a big reason why. Shannon is fearless, and her story shows that change—even on the toughest issues—really is possible.”

– *Michael Bloomberg, entrepreneur, philanthropist, and three-term mayor of New York City*

“There is nothing more powerful than a mother on a mission—and Shannon perfectly explains why. This mother has fought to lay the groundwork for one of America’s largest movements for gun violence prevention.”

– *Congresswoman Lucy McBath (GA-06)*

“A page-turner, overflowing with moving stories as well as practical advice for those who are waking up to the realization that there is too much at stake to sit on the sidelines. . . . Shannon’s courage and down-to-earth approach radiate from every page, and the theme of finding her ‘soul sisters’ in her fight is as powerful as it is universal.”

– *Cecile Richards, former president of Planned Parenthood and New York Times bestselling author of Make Trouble*

“Shannon Watts is a true activist for our time. After Sandy Hook, she channeled her despair and fury into action. *Fight Like a Mother* will inspire you to take an issue on and, ultimately, change the world.”

– *Katie Couric, journalist, New York Times bestselling author, cancer advocate, podcast host, and documentary filmmaker*

“Shannon Watts is the embodiment of an age-old story that never ceases to inspire: anyone, regardless of who and where they are in life, can create a paradigm shift. Even if change seems impossible. *Fight Like a Mother* is practical and personal—not only equipping you with the necessary and nitty-gritty tools to start a movement, but also the fearless mentality to do it now.”

– *Preet Bharara, former US attorney and host of the Stay Tuned with Preet podcast*

“Shannon Watts’s fight is for her kids and all our kids. That fight animates her work with Moms Demand Action, her life, and her wonderful book. In *Fight Like a Mother*, Shannon shows how she stewards this rocket ship of hope for those of us distraught by the epidemic of gun violence in our country through clear, disciplined approaches to movement building, volunteering, branding, and deep gun violence data literacy. A great read!”

– *Chelsea Clinton, New York Times bestselling author and vice chair of the Clinton Foundation*

“It’s encouraging to see someone tell the story that, sadly, has unfolded over and over again in this country—moms springing into action when their children are put at risk. This book has the potential to become a primer on how to activate the parent community and make change so we can see a better tomorrow.”

– *Soledad O’Brien, journalist, documentarian, news anchor, and producer*

“Shannon Watts is proof that activism and community can actually change laws and lives. *Fight Like a Mother* is a brilliant call to action for anyone hoping to get off the sidelines and create meaningful and lasting impact.”

– *Sophia Bush, actress and activist*

“The world needs angry women right now. It’s time we embrace the passion and action behind saying ‘enough is enough.’ *Fight Like a Mother* is a testament to the positive power of women’s anger and using it as an unstoppable force for change.”

– *Soraya Chemaly, writer, activist, and bestselling author of Rage Becomes Her*

“There is nothing more powerful than a mother’s love, and there is nothing more terrifying than a mama bear protecting her cubs. Shannon and Moms Demand Action have revolutionized grassroots organizing; and they’ve successfully challenged and beat back one of the most powerful lobbying groups in DC: the NRA. This book is a guidebook to all who are looking to drive real and lasting change in their communities.”

– *Congresswoman Robin L. Kelly (IL-02)*

“Shannon is an inspiration to every mom fighting to build a better, safer country for our kids. Her story reminds us that, together, we can be a powerful force for change—and that you should never underestimate a mom’s ability to get things done.”

– *Governor Gina M. Raimondo of Rhode Island*

“Have you ever thought you weren’t powerful enough to make a difference? Well, Shannon Watts is proof that one fiercely dedicated person can impact an entire movement. *Fight Like a Mother* illuminates how the very skills that we use daily as mothers are the exact skills necessary to take down the NRA. Shannon is my personal hero. Read this book and she will be yours as well.”

– *Debra Messing, actress, advocate, and activist*

**FIGHT
LIKE A
MOTHER**



FIGHT LIKE A MOTHER

How a Grassroots Movement
Took on the Gun Lobby and
Why Women Will Change the World

Shannon Watts
with Kate Hanley



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Shannon Watts will donate a majority of the books' proceeds to nonprofits working to end gun violence.

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of December 14, 2012, I was home alone—just me, the morning news, and a few baskets of laundry that needed folding. With my husband in meetings and my five kids in school—my son in middle school and the four girls in high school or college—I was looking forward to a little quiet time. I'd just dumped another pile of clothes onto the bed for folding when the news broke of a shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

I stood transfixed by the live footage of children being marched out of their school into the woods for safety. Walking in a single-file line with their hands on one another's shoulders, they looked so small, and so scared. As a mother, I wanted to fly through the TV screen to put my arms around them and protect them. It was a moment of instant heartbreak, made worse when I imagined what the parents of those children must be feeling as they raced to the school, not knowing whether their child was dead or alive—or worse, discovering that their child had been murdered in the sanctity of their elementary school.

I thought of my own kids. How, on their first days of kindergarten, they'd seemed entirely too young, too small, and too vulnerable to go out into the world on their own. Even now, as teens and young adults, they still seemed like babies to me.

“Please, God, don't let this be as bad as it seems,” I found



myself saying out loud. Although I was raised Catholic, I hadn't



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prayed in years. Yet here I was, asking for a miracle to minimize the horror I was witnessing.

Devastatingly, what had happened inside the school was far worse than anyone could have imagined. That morning, a twenty-year-old man had used a semiautomatic rifle and two semiautomatic pistols to shoot his way through the locked doors of a small-town elementary school—an iconic representation of the innocence of childhood—and murder six educators and twenty first-graders as they hid in bathrooms and closets.

I pushed the pile of laundry aside and sat down on the bed, dumbstruck. As I covered my face with my hands, I thought of the long list of mass shootings that had happened in recent years. Columbine High School in Colorado. Red Lake High School in Minnesota. Virginia Tech. Fort Hood in Texas. A movie theater in Aurora, Colorado. A Safeway in Tucson, Arizona. An immigrant center in Binghamton, New York. A mall in Omaha, Nebraska. In my mind's eye, I envisioned a map of the United States with dots appearing in the location of each shooting. The image turned my stomach.

I felt overwhelming sadness looking at the faces of the families on my TV. My heart ached for the mothers who were receiving the unthinkable news that their children weren't coming home. But at the same time, I was enraged at the terrible injustice victimizing these children—how the systems and laws that were supposed to protect them had so clearly failed. If our children weren't safe in their schools, they weren't safe anywhere.

I actually said out loud, “Why does this keep happening?”

In that moment, I was disgusted by my own inaction—the complacent way I’d assumed that someone else would do something. After all, I’d seen this play out before—I’d watched the media coverage after every mass shooting. I’d shed tears for the people whose lives were taken by an angry man—later I’d learn that it was nearly *always* a man—with a gun. I’d gotten angry and thought, “Someone should do something!” And then I’d gone back to my normal life, to my job when I was still working, or to my family responsibilities now as a stay-at-home mom.

In my head, I heard only one word in response to my question, and that word was *Enough*. Enough waiting for legislators to pass better gun laws. Enough hoping that things would somehow get better. Enough swallowing my frustration when politicians offered their thoughts and prayers but no action. Enough listening to the talking heads on the news channels calling for more guns and fewer laws. Enough complacency. Enough standing on the sidelines.

I knew I had two choices: move my family of seven to another country with less gun violence, or stay and fight to make this country that I and my family love safer for all of us. I had no idea what that fight would look like, much less how to participate in it. I just knew I had to do *something*.

And while I’d never been directly affected by gun violence, two incidences in particular had made a big impression on me.

The first mass shooting I remember was in 1991 in Killeen, Texas. I was a twenty-year-old college student, living with my parents about two hundred miles away in Plano, Texas. I was home alone on that day, too, watching the news coverage after

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a man had driven his pickup truck through the window of a Luby's cafeteria and emptied half a dozen high-capacity clips into the crowd of more than one hundred diners. He killed twenty-three people that day and injured twenty-seven others. I tore myself away from the television to answer the phone. When I heard my dad's voice, I burst into tears.

Another mass shooting had recently hit closer to home. In 2012, a shooter dressed in tactical gear set off tear gas grenades inside a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, during a midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises*. As moviegoers scrambled to get out of the theater, the shooter used a semiautomatic rifle to kill twelve of them and wound fifty-eight others.

The night after that shooting, my daughter and stepdaughter had plans to take my son, Sam, to see the same movie in our hometown of Zionsville, Indiana. Even though Sam wasn't yet thirteen at the time and the movie was rated PG-13, I agreed—he had always loved all things Batman. Just before they left, more news about the shooting came on the TV in our kitchen. I hurried over to the remote to turn it off, but it was too late. Sam had heard the details and was visibly shaken.

My youngest had always been an anxious kid. He never wanted to stay home alone. He often slept on the floor of our bedroom because of bad dreams. He generally ended up in the nurse's office with a stomachache the day of a big test. He had even developed anxiety attacks, which a therapist was helping him with. Things had just started getting a little better when the Aurora shooting happened.

That night in the kitchen, I put my hands on his shoulders, looked him in the eyes, and told him, "It's okay. You're safe. It

won't happen here." Sam looked dubious, but he and his sisters were already on the way out the door, and he really did want to see the new Batman movie. So they went.

I didn't think about it again until they all came home, a lot earlier than expected. The girls told me how as soon as they sat down, Sam had gotten upset, saying he was afraid a man with a gun was going to burst in at any moment. When he started crying, they took him into the lobby to try to soothe him, but ultimately they decided to leave.

In the months that followed, Sam had nightmares and anxiety attacks and slept on my bedroom floor most nights.

Now, only months later, I dreaded having to tell Sam about Sandy Hook, particularly because it had happened in a school just like the one he attended. We could avoid movie theaters, but there was no getting around going to school. I spent most of the rest of that Friday thinking primarily about how I would break the news to Sam. Too upset myself to be a steadying force for him, I decided to put off telling him a little longer.

On Saturday morning I tried to balance myself by going to yoga. I didn't want to go. I'm not really the yoga type—my mind is always going, and I'm the first to admit that I can be controlling and tense. On a good day, I dreaded going to class a bit; on this day, the thought of it made me sweat. But I went anyway. Still shattered by the thought of the grief-stricken parents in Connecticut who'd lost their babies in such a brutal, horrifying way, I willed myself into the car to attend class.

Once at class, I waited for a sense of serenity to settle in. I sat in hero pose. I listened to my classmates' whispery ujjayi breaths. But despite my best efforts, I did not feel calm. All I

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could think of were the pundits I'd seen that morning offering condolences without calling for any changes. To be honest, all I felt was pissed off.

I thought of my prayer the day before, and I knew that my prayer had to involve more than just thoughts. It needed to include action. I had to *do something*, and that something wasn't yoga. So I jumped up, rolled up my mat, and bolted out the door.

Once home, I didn't even take my coat off. I grabbed my laptop and opened it on the kitchen counter while my husband John and the kids milled around, finishing breakfast and piling plates in the sink. I went online to search for support. I thought there had to be some kind of organization already in existence—like a Mothers Against Drunk Driving for gun violence prevention. But all I found were small state organizations working on local gun violence issues—which had made important strides but didn't add up to the nationwide grassroots army I was envisioning—and a handful of think tanks in Washington, DC, most of which were run and staffed by men.

I knew I wanted to be in the company of other women who were connected to the heart of the issue—the fact that more guns and fewer gun laws meant less safe kids. I could sense that moms were the moral and emotional counterbalance to the gun lobby's bluster and posturing. While it was true that the National Rifle Association was incredibly powerful and had covered a lot of ground by making gun extremists afraid their guns would be taken away from them, American mothers—especially now, in the wake of Sandy Hook—were

afraid their *children* would be taken away from them. If that wasn't the type of threat that would spark a mama bear mentality, I didn't know what would.

Women are superheroes every day in their families and communities. I wanted to bring that mentality to this fight.

After looking online for almost an hour, I decided to make my own Facebook page called One Million Moms for Gun Control (we would later change our name to Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America) in an attempt to start an online conversation with other moms who were feeling the same way I was.

At that time, I had seventy-five Facebook friends and an inactive Twitter handle. I was not a social media phenom.

“You sure you want to do that?” John asked.

“It's just a Facebook page,” I said. “Not a big deal.”

Then I typed the words that would change my life—and create the nation's first and largest grassroots counterweight to the gun lobby (words that I hope will continue to impact the story of America's gun violence crisis):

This site is dedicated to action on gun control—not just dialogue about anti-gun violence. Change will require action by angry Americans outside of Washington, DC. We need to organize a Million Mom March in 2013. Join us—we will need strength in numbers against a resourceful, powerful, and intransigent gun lobby.

I started this page because, as a mom, I can no longer sit on the sidelines. I am too sad and too angry. Don't let anyone tell you we can't talk about this tragedy now—

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they said the same after Virginia Tech, Gabby Giffords, and Aurora. The time is now.

I wrote this without knowing that there had been a Million Mom March in 2000 on the National Mall calling for gun reform after the 1999 Columbine shooting. I didn't know anything about state or federal gun laws. And I didn't know that a network of gun extremists lay in wait to attack anyone who dared to change the status quo on guns. In retrospect, that one action probably had such a big effect because I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Because I was so afraid for my children's safety, I was fearless in raising my hand to become the tip of the spear.

The Likes on my Facebook post started coming in instantly. So did the messages. I heard from a mother in North Carolina who had resisted the urge to run to school to check on her eight-year-old after hearing the news reports—in just a few weeks she would become the state chapter leader of Moms Demand Action. I also heard from a mother in Houston who'd been out getting her family's Christmas tree when she heard about Sandy Hook—she would go on to create a campaign in her state that persuaded hundreds of Texas companies to put up signage prohibiting open carry on their premises. And I heard from a mother in Silicon Valley who'd walked out of her job when she heard the news—she would never return to that job and became a full-time volunteer instead.

Women everywhere were asking how they could join my organization, and I didn't even realize I'd started one.

As I stood at my kitchen counter, hearing the notifications on my phone and computer ding incessantly, a memory popped

into my head. The month before, John and I had been on vacation in Arizona and had our horoscopes read just for fun.

“I see you having a huge following,” the astrologer had told me. “And I see you changing laws—not as a politician, but as more of an activist. You’re leading thousands of people from your kitchen table.”

At the time, I’d shot John a skeptical look. *Me, an activist? Whatever you say, lady.* I was a former public relations executive and a mom who had never signed a petition or been to a single rally.

“You have some soul sisters,” she continued. “They’ll help you get this done.”

I was dubious. But that phrase—*soul sisters*—that’s what popped into my head as the messages from moms all over the country poured in. These were my soul sisters, finding me—and in my kitchen, no less!

As the hours went by, I began to feel in my gut that I’d tapped into something powerful. I knew moms would respond to a clarion call for the safety of kids everywhere, but this was more intense than that. This was the unwavering power of a million moms’ hearts all channeling their love, their rage, and their strength into something momentous. As one woman after another reached out to me, I had the strange sensation that I was watching a story unfold that I already knew the ending to.

I knew we’d caught lightning in a bottle, but I couldn’t stop to contemplate it—I was too busy responding to each and every message personally.

A frenzy of activity kept my emotions at bay the rest of that day and most of the next. I kept the TV off so we didn’t have

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a repeat of the situation after Aurora when Sam accidentally found out about the movie theater shooting. But as Sunday night approached, I knew I had to tell Sam about what had happened.

I wanted him to hear about the shooting from me, not from a friend or his teachers at school, because I was certain it would send him into another anxiety spiral. As I went into his room to deliver the news, I braced myself for the worst—a meltdown or tears. I made a mental note to call his therapist the next day to help us deal with the fallout. Instead, when I told Sam what had happened, he looked at me and said, “I understand. That’s just what happens in America, Mom.” Then he casually returned to playing a video game.

I was gutted by how quickly Sam had transformed from a boy who was traumatized by the news of a mass shooting to one who was barely fazed by it. It wasn’t an indication of his getting older; it spoke to the horrifying effect that the increasing frequency of these events was having on our entire nation.

Sam’s nonreaction showed me in a way that hadn’t fully crystallized before just how helpless we all felt the situation had become. It deepened my resolve to lock arms with other women and mothers to do something about gun violence and to fix our broken country. I knew I couldn’t live like this anymore. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to let my children die like this!

When the kids were back at school the next day, I started looking more deeply into gun violence in America, and I was shocked by what I learned. Mass shootings had gotten my attention and sparked my motivation, but I hadn’t realized the

extent to which they are just tiny drops in an ocean of gun deaths every year.

I had no idea that an average of ninety-six Americans are killed by guns every *day*—for a total of around thirty-five thousand people every year—and that seven of the people who die each day are children. And I had no idea that, at that time, there was nearly one gun in the United States for every person (that number has since risen so that now there are more guns than people in the US). I learned that America’s rate of gun homicides is twenty-five times higher than the rate in other high-income countries. I saw so clearly that we had given the gun lobby’s experiment of “more guns and too few gun laws” plenty of chances to prove itself, and it had failed. Miserably.

I also saw that gun safety is an issue that directly affects women—and not just those of us who are mothers wanting to protect our kids. Even though school shootings and other shootings in public places are the most likely to make the news, shootings related to domestic or family violence happen every single day with little media attention. Each month, fifty American women are shot and killed by a domestic abuser. That’s more than one every day.

I knew I’d seen only the tip of the iceberg. I also knew that a mom fighting to protect her children was way more powerful than a gun lobbyist fighting to protect gun manufacturers’ profits. Looking at the statistics helped me understand that I didn’t want to just march, rally, and protest. I wanted to bring together a badass group of women who could go toe to toe with gun lobbyists in every city and state. I wanted to raise an army of tough mothers.

GUN VIOLENCE in AMERICA

by
the **NUMBERS**

393,000,000 The number of guns owned by American civilians in 2017¹

329,905,500 The US population as of October 31, 2018²

1.2 The number of guns for each and every American

270,000,000 The number of guns owned by American civilians in 2007³

25 The number of countries with the next highest rates of gun ownership you'd have to combine to reach the total of American guns in circulation

33,130 The number of Americans who died in gun-related deaths in 2014⁴

36,252 The number of Americans who died in gun-related deaths in 2015⁵

38,658 The number of Americans who died in gun-related deaths in 2016⁶

96 The average number of Americans killed by guns every day⁷

8,300 The number of American kids who are sent to the hospital each year with a gunshot wound⁸

10x How much more likely it is that a black American will be killed by a gun than a white American.⁹

15x How much more likely it is that a black child in America will be killed by a gun than a white child¹⁰

50 The number of American women shot to death by intimate partners each month¹¹

25x How much higher the rate of gun homicide (not including suicide) in America is than in other high-income countries¹²

82% The percentage of worldwide gun deaths that happen in the United States¹³

4.28% The percentage of the worldwide population that resides in the United States¹⁴

Since that fateful day in my kitchen in 2012, Moms Demand Action has grown to nearly six million supporters and hundreds of thousands of active volunteers, and our numbers are increasing all the time. We have become the David to the NRA's Goliath, despite its hundred-year head start, its long-standing relationships with politicians, and its deep pockets. And despite the unevenness of our match-up, we are winning.

In dozens of states, we've defeated permitless carry, proposals to allow guns in K-12 schools, and bills that would force colleges to allow guns on college campuses. We've helped pass eleven red flag laws—eight of them since the 2018 shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. (Red flag laws provide a legal means to temporarily remove guns from people who are demonstrable threats to themselves or to others; only two existed before our organization was started.)

If you're reading these accomplishments and feeling surprised, it's no accident—our losses get a lot more attention in the media than our wins. After all, the old adage about the news says, "If it bleeds, it leads." And our losses, honestly, mean that more people will die. When we help beat back a bad gun bill—which we do hundreds of times every year—it doesn't get covered because it doesn't have the drama that draws attention.

Despite the quiet ups and the overexposed downs of the gun violence prevention movement, we're making important strides. But our work will never be done. That's a feeling most moms are already familiar with. After all, being a mom is the one job you never clock out of. But somehow, even though there's no way to prepare yourself for the demands of

motherhood, you just do it. This is what gave me the courage (or stupidity?) to start that Facebook page. I didn't know what would come of it; I just knew I had to do it.

That *knowing* is maybe something you've felt before, too—a calling to take action, even though you have no idea what that action might be. I've learned that those moments of knowing are gifts. No matter what horrible event led to them, those flashes of insight have so much power in them—and if you act on them, they'll lead you exactly where you need to go. You'll find your soul sisters, and together you'll move mountains.

If this feels daunting, I get it. As a mom, you may feel too overwhelmed by keeping up with your family responsibilities or the deliverables at work to even think about getting involved in such a thing, much less actually creating change. But everything you've done and felt as a mom gives you enormous and uniquely powerful strength.

After all, activism equals organizing, and if there's one thing moms know how to do, it's organize. Moms also have extremely well-honed multitasking skills. We're used to doing all of the jobs, from scheduling and hosting family events to advocating on behalf of our kids to putting our foot down when someone's out of line—all things that translate directly to advocacy. And we have numbers on our side—there are eighty million moms in the United States alone. Moms make miracles happen in their households every day. But if we unite to work together? We're unstoppable.

In a time when so many things divide Americans, the issues that speak to moms cut across party lines, as evidenced by the fact that our membership comes from both red and blue states. Of course, it also includes women who aren't moms—and

men. Nothing makes me smile more than seeing a man in one of our red Moms Demand Action T-shirts. Since the earliest days, we have said that Moms Demand Action is for “mothers and others”—but to be clear, *women* are taking the lead.

Because for too long, women have been asked to make the food, set up chairs, and own the menial tasks of advocacy while men set the strategy and bask in the spotlight. Women have done all the work, and men have gotten the credit. It’s high time we changed that!

NRA members love to use intimidation as a weapon—later in this book you’ll hear about the threats I’ve received and the men with semiautomatic rifles who show up at Moms Demand Action meetings—but here’s a truth for you: moms are scarier than gun lobbyists. Gun lobbyists hide behind anonymity, legislative bureaucracy, and stacks of money. Meanwhile, moms already go into battle every day for the people they love. Activism just channels that warrior energy into a different arena.

Fight Like a Mother is part manifesto, part memoir, and part manual, and I wrote it because I often wished I’d had a guidebook to help me find my way in the years since I first created that Facebook page. Since that fateful day, I and the army of volunteers who fuel Moms Demand Action have distilled eleven principles—mantras if you will—that guide our actions, help us stay on track, and keep us motivated. In this book I’ll walk you through each of them so you can take what we’ve learned and put it to use fighting for the things that matter to you, whether that’s commonsense gun laws, reproductive rights, environmental protections, education reform, or whatever else gives you that feeling that it’s time to act.

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I'll also share a behind-the-scenes look at how Moms Demand Action has become the gun lobby's worst nightmare—you won't believe some of the things that have happened!—but my sincerest wish is that this book will inspire you to get out there, raise some hell, and do some good. It's time to fight like a mother!



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