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## Female Persuasion

### A Study of How the Firearms Industry Markets to Women and the Reality of Women and Guns

*This executive summary is taken from the December 1994 study **Female Persuasion: How the Firearms Industry Markets to Women and the Reality of Women and Guns**. For a copy of the complete study please send a check or money order for \$12.00 to the Violence Policy Center, 2000 P Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036.*

### Executive Summary

In the early 1980s handgun sales in the United States—as measured by production—slumped dramatically. The firearms industry soon realized that the drop stemmed from saturation of the primary market of white males. Manufacturers then did what any industry does under such circumstances: first, they redesigned their product line to resell the white-male core market; second, they worked to develop new markets, with the primary focus on women.

As part of this approach, the firearms industry presents female handgun ownership as one more male bastion falling to women's equality. Arguments against ownership are portrayed as a patriarchal attempt to deny women their freedom.

The primary marketing tactic, however, is not equality, but fear. The pitch to women is simple: *You're a woman. Some stranger is going to try and rape you. You'd better buy a handgun.* People buy handguns out of fear and stranger rape—it is theorized—is what women fear most. As a result, the gun lobby has been relentless in its use of fear of rape to promote handguns as self-defense weapons.

*Female Persuasion* has two goals: to explore the reality of women and firearms violence in light of these new marketing trends; and, to act as a resource and catalyst to involve women and advocacy organizations in the firearms violence debate.

In 1989 Smith & Wesson of Springfield, Massachusetts became the first firearms manufacturer to offer a line of self-defense handguns designed especially for women. The company's LadySmith program targeted women with handguns that "manage to be elegant without sacrificing any of their practicality." Since then, Smith & Wesson has gone on to become the leader in marketing handguns to women. Other companies that have targeted women include Beretta USA, Davis Industries, Derringer USA, and Lorcin Engineering.

While in their mainstream advertising manufacturers present this marketing shift as the manifestation

of a natural concern for women's safety, in industry publications this pretense is abandoned. An ad that appeared in *Ladies Home Journal* for the "All-American" 9mm pistol produced by Colt's Manufacturing Company, Inc. of Hartford, Connecticut features a presumably single mother tucking her beaming child into bed. A Raggedy Ann doll is in the little girl's hands. The headline states, "Self-Protection is more than your right... it's your responsibility." The same advertisement appears as the centerpiece of a second ad that appeared later in the industry trade journal *SHOT Business*. Above it the headline reads: "You Might Think This Ad is About Handguns. It's Really About Doubling Your Business." The text of the industry ad observes:

Women represent 53% of America's population. And here at Colt, we believe that addressing women's security needs is not only a responsible and necessary objective, it's also smart business. When this ad ran in a national women's magazine, it seized nationwide media attention. More important, it gave Colt and its products top-of-mind awareness in a huge and largely untapped market. Today, Colt is making every effort to seek out and capture new markets for our products, and we welcome the fact that women are now a growing and entitled segment of the firearms market. As potential customers, they must not be ignored. And as a responsible voice in this firearms industry we will continue to address this market and expand your opportunities to serve their needs.

In a rare candid admission by a gun manufacturer representative, Judy Eberhart, Winchester's manager of dealer services, told *American Firearms Industry* magazine:

We know the women's firearms market is growing by leaps and bounds. There's a big demand for self- defense and home protection...and there's a lot more single women out there who need that information. Hunting is not a growing sport and there aren't more lands being set aside for hunting, so what we've got in that area is in danger of shrinking. Self-defense, however, illustrated best by the recent trouble in California [riots] and Florida [Hurricane Andrew] is uppermost in peoples' minds.

Complementing women's firearms is a wide range of women's "accessories" such as specialized purses, waist bags (fanny packs), holsters, and belts to aid in concealed carrying. Not surprisingly, each month, *Women & Guns* magazine, a monthly publication catering to female gun owners and owned by the pro-gun Second Amendment Foundation, is replete with ads for such products. Yet, according to the National Rifle Association's 1994 "Compendium of State Laws Governing Handguns," 36 states have laws that either make it difficult to obtain carry permits or that ban concealment entirely. The question as to whether these products are being sold only to women who are legally carrying handguns was answered in a 1994 *Women & Guns* reader survey. The survey reported that 91 percent of the magazine's readers agreed that, even if doing so were illegal, they would carry a handgun if they felt threatened.

The industry recognizes the importance of educating dealers on the intricacies of catering to female customers. In the last two years the industry journals *Shooting Industry* and *SHOT Business* have added specialty columns on women and firearms. Each column carries a similar message: Try not to treat women like they are stupid. Apparently a message that bears repeating, the April 1994 *Shooting Industry* column coaches retailers on the sensitivity required in selling self-defense handguns through the purse-snatching saga of a prospective customer:

If a woman like Rebecca walks into your store to purchase a self-defense weapon, don't make her feel like an idiot for not doing it sooner. Just telling you her story will probably be enough to bring tears to her eyes. All she wants from you is reassurance that she's doing the right thing.

Recognizing the mutual benefits increased gun ownership would offer to all members of America's firearms lobby, pro-gun organizations have worked with the industry to develop new self-defense and sporting programs for women. Lobbying organizations that have worked to both scare and entice women into buying handguns include the National Rifle Association of America and the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms. They have been aided on the national level by the National Shooting Sports Foundation and its recently founded sister organization, the Women's Shooting Sports Foundation.

The cover of the NRA pamphlet *A Question of Self-Defense* offers a chilling quote against a black, blood-spattered background. "Tell them what rape is. Be graphic. Be disgusting. Be obscene. Make them sick. If they throw up, then they have the tiniest idea of what it is!"<sup>1</sup> Boston rape victim." Anecdotes contained in the pamphlet are written in lurid, graphic detail. A key component of the pitch is the assumed isolation of women. The message is clear<sup>2</sup> not only is a stranger going to try and rape you; *no one will be there to help you*. Your last and only hope is a gun.

A second NRA pamphlet, *It Can Happen to You*, opens to a drawing of an unsuspecting, elderly woman. Written from the female perspective (an earlier edition had been gender-neutral), the pamphlet warns:

In nature, the predator preys on the weak, the sick, the aged. It stalks. It waits patiently for the precise moment when the victim appears defenseless. Then, it strikes... [T]here is no way of telling a criminal predator by the way he looks. He might be a potential suitor.

The marketing tactics employed by the industry and pro-gun organizations are based on time-honored myths regarding violence against women. Section Two of *Female Persuasion* looks at four common myths used to market firearms to women versus the reality of violence against women and the role firearms play.

**MYTH #1:** Stranger rape is the most common violent crime against women.

**FACT:** Women are most likely to be victimized by people they know. The National Victim Center's 1992 study, *Rape in America: A Report to the Nation*, revealed that 75 percent of all rapes involve offenders known to the victim, including neighbors, friends, husbands, boyfriends and relatives. Rape in America is a tragedy of youth, with the majority of cases occurring during childhood and adolescence. More than six out of every 10 rapes occur to children and adolescents under the age of 18. According to the Gun Control Act of 1968 persons must be at least 18 years of age to purchase a long gun and 21 years of age to buy a handgun.

**MYTH #2:** Most homicide stems from criminal attacks by strangers.

**FACT:** According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), of the 4,993 women killed in 1992, 29 percent were slain by their husbands or boyfriends<sup>3</sup> less than 10 percent of female victims were killed by strangers. Although the overall risk of homicide for women is substantially lower than that of men, their risk of being killed by a spouse or an intimate acquaintance is far greater. A 1976 to 1987 analysis of FBI data revealed that almost 40 percent of women were killed by their spouse, an intimate acquaintance, or a family member. Women were killed by strangers in less than 10 percent of all cases (compared to men who were killed by strangers in 17 percent of all cases).

A firearm, usually a handgun, was the most common weapon used to kill victims of either sex (36 percent of all homicides against women involved a handgun). However the circumstances of firearm homicide differ significantly between men and women. In cases where the offender had been determined, men were most likely to be shot and killed by acquaintances; women were most often shot

and killed by their spouses. During the entire 12-year study interval *more than twice as many women were shot and killed by their husband or an intimate acquaintance [with firearms] than were murdered by strangers using firearms, knives, or any other means.*

Family and intimate homicide is often preceded by an escalating pattern of violence. Having a firearm in the home may be a key contributor to the escalation of nonfatal spouse abuse to homicide. A 1986 study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that:

Over 80 percent of the homicides noted during our study occurred during arguments or altercations. [I]n cases of assault, people tend to reach for the most lethal weapon readily available. Easy access to firearms may therefore be particularly dangerous in households prone to domestic violence.

**MYTH #3:** People who want to kill themselves will find a way no matter what; if a firearm is not available, they will merely use some other means.

**FACT:** For all our fear and fascination with guns and murder, the fact remains that most gun deaths in America are *not* a result of homicide, but suicide. Like homicides, most gun suicides are not committed with weapons purchased specifically for the attempt but with firearms already available. With the increased marketing of firearms—specifically handguns—to women for self-defense, female patterns of suicide have changed. Previously, a general rule of thumb was that women attempted to kill themselves two to three times more often than men. Men, however, succeeded three times more often than women. The reason being that women traditionally used other less lethal means; men used guns. In 1970 poisoning was the suicide method most commonly used by women. This means has decreased in inverse proportion to handgun use. Now, like men, women most often kill themselves with firearms.

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) reports overall female suicide rates, as well as firearms suicide rates, peaked for all women from 1970 to 1977. However, the proportion of total female suicides committed by 15- to 34-year-olds rose five percent, from 27 percent in 1970 to 32 percent in 1989. At the same time the proportion of total suicides committed by 35- to 54-year-olds dropped 42 percent (from 77 percent of total female suicides in 1970 to 35 percent in 1989). The increase in number of suicides by 15- to 34-year-olds can be attributed primarily to suicide by firearms. The NCHS notes that firearms were used in 45 percent of female suicides committed by women aged 15 to 34 in 1989, compared to 32 percent in 1970—an increase of 13 percent. For all women, the percentage that used firearms to commit suicide jumped from 30 percent in 1970 to 41 percent in 1989. Most of this increase could be traced to suicides involving young women.

**MYTH #4:** Guns, especially handguns, are effective self-defense tools.

**FACT:** The April 1994 Justice Department study *Guns and Crime* revealed that according to the National Crime Victimization Survey only about one percent (62,200) of all intended or actual victims of violence used a firearm of any type (handgun, rifle, or shotgun) to defend themselves. Another 20,300 reported using a firearm to defend their property during a theft, household burglary, or motor vehicle theft. (It should be noted however, that all self-defense uses were defined by the survey respondent, and would therefore include legitimate threats as well as *perceived* threats.) Of these instances, it is not known whether the gun was used successfully to *stop* the crime. In comparison, the Justice study reported, offenders armed with handguns alone committed a record 931,000 violent crimes in 1992.

Despite the best efforts of the firearms industry and its supporters to portray gun ownership as a guarantor of personal safety, the reality presents quite a different picture. Like their male counterparts, women rarely use guns to kill criminals or stop crimes. In fact, in 1992 for every time a woman used a handgun to justifiably kill a stranger in self-defense, 239 female lives were ended in handgun

homicides. For that year 37 states reported no instances of handgun justifiable homicides by women, including New York, Georgia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia. The ratio of homicides to justifiable homicides in states that recorded both ranged from Florida's high of 113 to one to Oregon's low of 12 to one.

In 1992 the total number of justifiable homicides committed by private citizens was 348. Of these, 45 (13 percent) were committed by women. Handguns were used in 26 (58 percent) of the women's justifiable homicides. Most justifiable homicides involving women do not fit the stereotype promoted by the firearms industry of a single woman defending herself against a predatory stranger. When women kill in self-defense the attacker is far more likely to be someone known to them than a stranger. Of the 26 handgun self-defense killings reported to the FBI, 18 (69 percent) involved attackers known to the women: seven involved acquaintances; five involved husbands; two involved common-law husbands; the remaining single instances involved an ex-husband, a boyfriend, a son, and one unstated relationship. Only eight attackers (31 percent) were classified as strangers.

In conclusion, the belief that the mere possession of a firearm, usually a handgun, offers both security and personal empowerment has long been a fixture of male mythology in our culture. New efforts to peddle this myth to women are more than a matter of trying to sell shopworn goods. It is a bad solution to a real problem, one guaranteed to make it worse, not better.

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For a full copy of the 70-page study, please send a check or money order for \$12.00 to:

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