

The Red Pill: The Men's Rights Movement, White Supremacy, and Violence Against Women

By Evangeline Stratton

“Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.” – Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Bear with me, as I take you with me down the rabbit hole. Not Alice's exactly, but chillingly similar to the one Morpheus referenced in *The Matrix* with his offer of a “red pill.”¹

I started listening to Laura Bates's audiobook, “Men Who Hate Women,”² which explores the rise of extremist communities that despise women. In this book, Bates candidly exposes an online movement that uses hateful and toxic rhetoric to condone violence against women (including rape and murder³), and female servitude. The justification for this hatred and violence? These men, many of whom self-describe as involuntary celibates (“incels”) or are members of “men's rights movement” groups analogize their “awakening” to taking the “red pill,”⁴ and realizing that they have been the true victims of a feminist project to dismantle the subjugation of women.

Welcome to the “manosphere.” Where believing that women's autonomy over their own bodies and women's economic gains necessarily mean that men are losing power, status, and their “rightful” place in the patriarchy. In the “manosphere,” they believe they have been humiliated by women and girls who say “no” to them, and that their livelihoods have been threatened by women who belong at home in the kitchen. They believe masculinity itself is under attack.

Guess who else has taken the “red pill?” Alt-right nationalist groups, conspiracy theory groups, and white supremacy groups use this term in online discussion forums. These communities espouse views that female liberation and “wokeness” are direct threats to “their manlihood, their livelihood, their country.”⁵

Backlash against social progress isn't new, but my radio shows and social media feeds (not to mention SCOTUS opinions) are relaying a very real, current, and disturbing trend. Only recently,

¹ In the movie *The Matrix*, Morpheus offers Neo the red pill and says, “You stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” See IMDB <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>. Accessed 04 Apr. 2025.

² Bates, Laura. *Men Who Hate Women: From Incels to Pickup Artists: The Truth About Extreme Misogyny and How it Affects Us All*. E-book. Simon & Schuster, 2020.

³ The Netflix series “Adolescence” is a timely social commentary on the connection between misogyny and violence against women. *Netflix*. *Adolescence*, a Limited Series, 2025, <https://www.netflix.com/title/81756069>. Accessed 03 Apr. 2025.

⁴ See also Tiffany, Kaitlyn. *The Alt-Right Has Lost Control of Redpill*, *The Atlantic*. Apr. 13, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/04/red-pill-meme-alt-right-twitter/618577/>. Accessed 04 Apr. 2025. (Boys “began to use *taking the red pill* as code for ‘choosing to realize that feminism is destroying society and my life.’”).

⁵ Bates, *supra* n.2, at *Introduction*.

it became more common to name the harms of racism, ableism, patriarchy, colonialism, etc. in U.S. cultural spaces and society. Celebrating difference, valuing diversity, acknowledging the intersectional nature of identity, and working towards inclusion and belonging are themes that have gained traction in workplaces and schools, in child-rearing and social spaces. The #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements gained more support. It felt like progress – like the arc was truly bending towards justice.⁶

Yet now, in 2025, it feels like the rug has been pulled out from our feet, like backsliding and backlash in a more profound way. Stripping away of hard-fought gains, like access to abortion and healthcare. Banning books. Reverting to reductive ideas about gender roles. Demonization of black and brown people, immigrants and refugees, and non-conforming identities – especially trans folx.

As Bates wrote in 2020, these views are no longer relegated to chatrooms and locker rooms, but have seeped into corridors of power and our collective unconscious:

“The gap between the community’s purported aims and its actual activities enables it to act as something of a conduit, smuggling some of the misogynistic ideas of the wider manosphere into the public eye, behind a false shield of credibility.”⁷

This “shield of credibility” takes the form of publicly condoned and governmentally coordinated attacks on difference, autonomy, safety, and social support. These attacks require a sense of separation between the power-holders and historically marginalized groups and people who are seen as “other.” Partly, no doubt, due to the concept of victimhood being turned on its head (see the “manosphere,” for example). But primarily, these attacks are brought to maintain power, privilege, and control against a rising sense of their erosion.

I’ve spent over two decades volunteering, as a professional advocate, as a lawyer, and most recently as a grassroots organizer in the gender-based violence space. One central principle about gender-based violence I learned from the very beginning is that it is about power and control. Specifically, “power-over,” including coercive control and physical and sexual dominance.⁸ Perpetrators of gender-based violence attack victims’ agency and autonomy – in a moment, and progressively over time. They make victims’ lives feel smaller.

On a cultural level, one need only look to the “manosphere” to see blatant evidence of misogyny and violence against women discussed as necessary tools to control “uppity” girls and women who take men’s jobs, withhold sex, and dare to laugh at the incels.⁹ Women who have the power to consent (or not), to choose their sexual partner, to choose whether to have a child, to leave an abusive relationship – they “deserve” to be put in their place. To be raped, beaten, and to serve.

⁶ “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” This quote from many speeches made by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. echoes the words of 19th century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. *Theodore Parker And The 'Moral Universe,'* NPR’s All Things Considered. <https://www.npr.org/2010/09/02/129609461/theodore-parker-and-the-moral-universe>. Accessed 04 Apr. 2024.

⁷ Bates, *supra* n.2, at Chapter 4.

⁸ Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs: Home of the Duluth Model, *Power and Control Wheel*. <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/understanding-power-control-wheel/>. Accessed 05 Apr. 2025.

⁹ Bates, *supra* n.2.

These views are common in online spaces, though on occasion members do take their violence offline.¹⁰

“Manosphere” blogger Matt Forney wrote in a post titled “The Necessity of Domestic Violence”: “She’s weaker than you, beneath you and if she crosses you again, you’ll put her in the hospital.”¹¹ We see this twisted version of masculinity play out in families and relationships as intimate partner violence and child abuse, and as rape and the continuum of sexual violence.

But as Bates points out, it is not only women/feminists who have “limited, frustrated, diminished, hurt” men – it is the concept of masculinity, or “what it means to perform being a man,” that is at the root of this sense of diminishment.¹² This connection between ideas of masculinity and gender-based violence is crucial to understand.

In his latest book “Every Man: Why Violence Against Women is a Men’s Issue and What You Can Do About It,” Jackson Katz advocates for men and boys to take responsibility for male violence against women. Rather than discuss this issue as one that simply happens, Katz argues we should insert men as the “active agent”: “Using direct language is the first step toward shifting the onus of responsibility off of victims and survivors and onto where it belongs – on abusive men and the culture that produced them.”¹³

Dev Ramsawakh takes this analysis even further in their article “Rethinking Masculinities: Understanding diverse and intersecting masculinities to end Gender-Based Violence.”

Ramsawakh writes that in order to unpack this connection with culturally perpetuated ideas of masculinity, one must first understand how settler colonialism set the stage for false binaries of identity, contributing to bioessentialism or “the harmful idea that an individual’s body defines their identity and personality.”¹⁴ They point out that believing in biological inevitabilities reinforces the concept of “toxic masculinity.”¹⁵ But that “[u]nderstanding the impacts of colonialism and how it has shaped our perceptions of masculinity can help uplift and revitalize diverse cultural perspectives, promote inclusive models of care, and disrupt toxic forms of masculinity to prevent [gender-based violence].”

Ramsawakh explores how underrepresented masculinities – such as queer and trans, racialized and indigenous, and disabled – can help us root our analysis in an intersectional lens. Diverse masculinities exist and demonstrate important themes. First, that individuals have multiple and intersecting identities that have distinct (and sometimes competing)¹⁶ aspects of power and

¹⁰ Bates, *supra* n.2, Chapter 6 “Men Who Hurt Women.”

¹¹ Bates, *supra* n.2, Chapter 6 “Men Who Hurt Women.”

¹² Bates, *supra* n.2.

¹³ Baker, Carrie. *Jackson Katz Calls on ‘Every Man’ to End Men’s Violence Against Women*. Ms. Magazine, Apr. 4, 2025. <https://msmagazine.com/2025/04/04/jackson-katz-men-violence-women-gender-every-man-book/>.

¹⁴ Ramsawakh, Dev. *Rethinking Masculinities: Understanding diverse and intersecting masculinities to end Gender-Based Violence (GBV)*. Learning Network Brief 46. London, Ontario: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children. ISBN: 978-1-998746-03-3. (2025). <https://www.gbvlarningnetwork.ca/our-work/briefs/brief-46.html>. Accessed 03 Apr. 2025.

¹⁵ Ramsawakh, *supra* n.14.

¹⁶ Ramsawakh, *supra* n.14.

privilege.¹⁷ And second, this complexity in the way one can access or experience power and privilege demonstrates that gender-based violence is “fundamentally about power and control dynamics, not biology, masculinity or sexuality.”¹⁸

Essentialist, exclusionary, and rooted in dominance: misogyny and white supremacy demand that the “other” submit and/or be violated. They rely upon each other to prop up their particular brands of power and control. And while often utilizing the tools of violence on an individual and relationship level, these belief systems require a societal and cultural infrastructure.

We must see and name the throughlines. Banning books¹⁹ and cutting funds for libraries²⁰ and public media²¹ are connected to women’s reproductive freedom and efforts to create inclusivity. The materials targeted often relate to gender identity, LGBTQ+ issues, reproductive health, and racism, thus censoring and suppressing access to vital information and resources, experiences, and perspectives. Weakening public institutions that provide this crucial access to information erases the truth of lived experience and brings society a step closer to erasing the “other,” while increasing the harm marginalized groups experience. Similarly, trans visibility²² is connected to anti-racism²³. Legislation and regulations targeting gender-affirming care and other transphobic and homophobic laws are most prevalent in the same jurisdictions banning Critical Race Theory.²⁴ Presidential executive orders targeting transgender identity and DEI were released

¹⁷ For more on the theme of intersecting “target” and “agent” identities, see Nieto, Leticia and Margot Boyer, *Understanding Oppression*. (2006). <https://beyondinclusionbeyondempowerment.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/nieto-articles-understanding-oppression-2006.pdf>. Accessed 05 Apr. 2025. These articles appeared in ColorsNW Magazine in 2006 and 2007. The material was a preview of the concepts published in full length in a 2010 book. Nieto, Leticia, et al, *Beyond inclusion, Beyond Empowerment: A Developmental Strategy to Liberate Everyone*. Cuetzpalin Publishing, 2010.

¹⁸ Ramsawakh, *supra* n.14.

¹⁹ American Library Association, *Banned Books*. “Prior to 2020, the vast majority of challenges to library books and resources were brought by a single parent who sought to remove or restrict access to a book their child was reading. Recent censorship data are evidence of a well-organized movement, the goals of which include removing books about race, history, gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive health from America’s public and school libraries. Nearly **72% of censorship attempts in 2024** were initiated by pressure groups and decision makers who have been swayed by them.” <https://www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers#:~:text=Who%20challenges%20books?.of%2046%20titles%20per%20year>. Accessed 07 May 2025.

²⁰ *The White House Presidential Actions*. Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/continuing-the-reduction-of-the-federal-bureaucracy/>. Accessed 03 Apr. 2025.

²¹ *The White House Presidential Actions*. Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/05/ending-taxpayer-subsidization-of-biased-media/>. Accessed 07 May 2025.

²² *The White House Presidential Actions*. Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government, 20 Jan. 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>. Accessed 07 May 2025. See also Marimow, Ann E. & Jouvenal, Justin. *Supreme Court lets Trump ban transgender troops while case continues*. The Washington Post, May 6, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/05/06/transgender-troops-ban-supreme-court-trump/>. Accessed 07 May 2025.

²³ The majority of violent and fatal attacks on gender non-conforming people are against Black trans women. *Everytown for Gun Safety*. New Everytown Data on Transgender Homicides Reveals Concentration in the South, 13 Feb. 2024. <https://www.everytown.org/press/new-everytown-data-on-transgender-homicides-reveals-concentration-in-the-south/>. Accessed 07 May 2025.

²⁴ Tawa, Kayla & Bunts, Whitney. *How Queer Visibility Threatens White Power*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/blog/how-queer-visibility-threatens-white-power/>. Accessed 07 May 2025.

nearly simultaneously.²⁵ The government is steadily chipping away opportunities, autonomy, and choice. Life feels smaller.

This rabbit hole is dark and depressing, overwhelming and suffocating. How do we counter the apparent playbook that spans the spectrum from targeting the use of pronouns,²⁶ eliminating funding to address violence against women,²⁷ to targeting law firms committed to ensuring access to justice through pro bono work and immigration lawyers simply doing their ethical duties under the rule of law?²⁸ We've named the throughlines. We've protested the harm.

Maybe we stay on the course while we wait it out in our rabbit hole? Some have analogized the current patriarchal and white supremacist momentum to the moment before an "extinction burst."²⁹ This concept is based on behavioral psychology and the fundamentals of operant conditioning.³⁰ More specifically, when the reward for or reinforcement of a behavior is taken away, the behavior being extinguished resurges in a "burst" of frequency and intensity for a short period, before ceasing to exist. I admit, I find some hope in this characterization.

This could be true for us now. The hatred and violence in our society is "not good for human survival. This is a behavior that would be great if we could get it to go extinct."³¹ For example, people (society) who feel threatened by an overwhelming trend/push toward anti-racism values, gender equality, etc., are behaviorally reacting in this sort of "last ditch" effort to maintain the status quo and not have to change their behavior.

I don't know about you, but I need this little injection of hope to go with the "red pills" swallowed freely today. Extinction burst or not, I'm still fighting for what is right and good. To make all our lives a little bigger.

²⁵ *The White House Presidential Actions*. Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit Based Opportunity, 21 Jan. 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-illegal-discrimination-and-restoring-merit-based-opportunity/>. Accessed 07 May 2025.

²⁶ Brinkley, Collin. *US Colleges Returning to Campus Sexual Assault Rules Created During Trump's First Term*. AP News, Jan. 31, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/title-ix-trump-lgbtq-sex-assault-b7b6ad1cbe28331ce38ef896e6d4fd2b>. Accessed 08 Apr. 2025. ("...a federal judge in Kentucky overturned Biden's rule on Jan. 9, saying it was a presidential overstep and violated constitutional free speech rights by telling schools to honor students' preferred pronouns.").

²⁷ Friedman, Amanda. *'We're disaster planning': Trump's funding freeze rattles domestic violence nonprofits*. Politico, 01 March 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/01/funding-freeze-domestic-violence-00206807>. Accessed 08 May 2025.

²⁸ *The White House Presidential Actions*, *Preventing Abuses of the Legal System and the Federal Court*, March 22, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/preventing-abuses-of-the-legal-system-and-the-federal-court/>. Accessed 08 Apr. 2025. (Asserting that the immigration bar and "Big Law pro bono" practices are supporting false asylum claims.)

²⁹ "Are we seeing an extinction burst?" Celeste Headlee, LinkedIn, NPR Guest Host, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/celesteheadlee_are-we-seeing-an-extinction-burst-is-this-activity-7293251097249411074-Rd1x/. Accessed 03 Apr. 2025.

³⁰ See, for example, the work of B.F. Skinner. <https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/people/b-f-skinner>. Accessed 08 Apr. 2025.

³¹ Headlee, *supra* n. 22.