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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“I WAS AN ANGRY MEN’S RIGHTS ACTIVIST. NOW I’M A FIERCE FEMINIST” BY EDWIN HODGE

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



This story is republished from [MEL Magazine](#). MEL aims to challenge, inspire and encourage readers to drop any preconceived notions of who they’re supposed to be.

I discovered the men's rights movement when I was 22, working at a bookstore in downtown Kelowna, British Columbia. I was trying to earn some money before starting my second year at university.

I was in the self-help section "facing" our most popular books—arranging them so their covers, and not their spines, faced outward—when I noticed the title *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture*.

I had never even seen the word "misandry" before, but I was able to deduce its meaning immediately: If misogyny is hatred of women, then misandry must be hatred of men.

Well, that's kind of edgy and countercultural, I thought. I had never seen anything that said I—a white, heterosexual male—was actually the one being discriminated against. It was so provocative. The cover art was a white guy in a business suit being strangled by his necktie.

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I was in that strange, formative period when you're trying to find your adult identity, flirting with contrarian worldviews, so I thought, What the hell? I'll read this.

I bought it hook, line and sinker. I was studying political science at the time, so I had never thought about social processes like misogyny and sexism. It was revelatory. The book talked about how pop culture demonized straight, white men because they're the only demographic left that it's acceptable to make fun of.

The chapter that stood out the most was about how men are portrayed as these bumbling oafs on television, especially sitcoms. Their wives, meanwhile, are these enlightened women who have to endure their idiot husbands. Pop culture conveyed men as court jesters, the fools. The women were the empowered ones, the voices of reason. Home Improvement, with Tim Allen speaking in grunts, was the primary example.

Looking back, I realize Home Improvement was actually reproducing 1950s gender dynamics. It was about a ridiculously successful man who had his own TV show, was his own boss and took over the entire garage so he could spend all his free time fixing up old cars. His wife, however, was relegated to the domestic sphere, and even though she had a job, it was always incidental to her role as a mother and wife.

But it took me a long time to realize that.

I'm not sure which came first – my sense men were losing their place in society or my reading *Spreading Misandry* – but I do know the book crystallized that feeling.

The bookstore had this policy that allowed employees to essentially “check out” a book and report back to their colleagues about it. The idea was this would increase the literacy of the staff so we could all sell books more effectively, so I came back a week later and told them about *Spreading Misandry*.

Usually the book reports elicited conversation, but mine was met with stern silence. “You know, this guy has some valid points, although some parts are a little extreme,” I said. All the staff members present were women – most of them university students, some older women – and they started warily eyeing each other as I talked. I thought it was going to be my Sermon on the Mount, that I was revealing something everyone needed to know. Instead, a woman in her fifties looked at me for about forty seconds of awkward silence before the manager said, “Okay. Thanks for that.” It was one of the most cringeworthy moments from that period of my life.

At the time, though, it was just confirmation of misandry. Why would they be so angry if they weren't threatened by what I was saying? My co-workers were a lot less friendly to me after that.

About three weeks later, I was fired. I have absolutely no evidence that it was connected to my book summary. It might've been that I was kind of an asshole back then – I was rude and had a tendency to snap at

people I considered less intelligent.

I was so confused at that time in my life, so unsure of myself, that I was especially susceptible to something like men's rights. My politics were all over the map: I thought I was a libertarian at the same time that I was more deeply exploring my Catholicism – which is about as confused as you get. (Being a libertarian doesn't really jibe with the dictates of an authoritarian, hierarchical church.) Growing up, I loved guns and hunting and wanted to be in law enforcement. Then, in university, I realized I hated hunting and was suspicious of law enforcement.

Later, I discovered I suffer from clinical depression. There's lots of literature on how socially extremist groups – such as men's rights or **white supremacy** – exploit young men whose lives are in turmoil, their beliefs in conflict. Spreading Misandry was a recruitment piece and I was an easy target.

My girlfriend and I broke up at the end of that summer and I was devastated. The majority of my friends were women, but I started withdrawing from them and hanging out with guys more. My relationship with women became less about friendship and more about who I could hook up with.

I sought out other men who felt like me. This was in the Web 1.0, pre-social media days, so it was mostly chat rooms or poorly written proto-blogs on Angelfire, AOL and Geocities (all of them fueled by rage and fear). I read a little bit of *The Myth of Male Power* by Warren Farrell, and I adopted this rhetorical trick many men's rights activists employ: "I'm not a feminist and I'm not a men's rights activist," I would say. "I'm an egalitarian."

I didn't encounter the term "men's rights" until 2005, right before social media really took off. I'd Google "men's oppression" or "anti-feminist" and find anything I was looking for on people's Blogspot sites or in the comments on pre-Reddit sites like Fark. And, of course, 4chan.

Every once in a while I'd stumble across men's rights activists (MRAs)

advocating killing feminists, and I'd think to myself, That's insane. But then I'd do what a lot of MRAs do: I'd say, "Those voices are on the fringe," and argue they didn't speak for the movement as a whole.

My real life was entirely devoted to school, so my men's rights activism occurred exclusively in the classroom. We'd talk about the Equal Rights Amendment in a political science class and I'd say, "Well, what about men?" We'd talk about feminist epistemology in philosophy class and I'd say, "Doesn't anyone care about the way men see the world?" I saw myself as more than just a provocateur.

I stayed away from sociology my first few years because those classes were predominantly women, and I shared a belief common among science, engineering and tech people that sociology wasn't "real" science – it was just about feelings and how men are the root of all evil. But I took an introductory sociology course as an upperclassman. We had these discussions about feminism and patriarchal institutions, and I kept thinking to myself, I don't oppress women. Why am I being attacked? Why am I the victim in this new feminist order? I despised sociology.

I graduated in 2006 with a political science degree and spent a couple years doing odd jobs – bartender, tuxedo salesman. Soon I realized I wanted to do academic work, specifically studying men and masculinity, so I re-enrolled in some sociology courses. I was like, I'll use my academic qualifications to talk about men's rights issues. I'll grit my teeth and listen to the feminists and read their stupid books, but then I'll go my own way. Things didn't go as planned.

The first semester I took Intro to Gender Theory and the teacher asked, "What does gender mean to you?" Everyone talked about their lived experiences as women or gay men. When it was my turn, I said, "I'm here to offer a man's point of view on gender."

My instructor smiled and said, "Well, you must love our textbooks, then." I looked at the syllabus and saw Masculinities and The Men and the Boys by Raewyn Connell, both about gender from the perspective of

men's lived experiences. I just thought, Well, shit.

I read them and it didn't take long for my men's rights beliefs to start falling away. They didn't stand up to all the empirical evidence I was finally reading – research that was informed by feminist theory and offered actual solutions.

Men are socialized to be stoic, rational beings. The only emotions we're allowed are anger and joy, and in a precious few instances, we're allowed to cry – like if our sports team loses. As an MRA, I always believed it was women and feminism putting men in this box. But these feminist texts not only validated the crisis of masculinity, they pointed out men are the biggest policers of masculinity. Men beat each other down for being "girly," for liking sewing or baking, for crying. For being "faggots." "You gotta man up." "You can't be a pussy, right?"

MRAs and feminists were acknowledging the same problems, but the MRAs weren't locating the right cause. The feminists pointed out, "No, actually this is rooted in the same patriarchal institutions that are harming women." It was subtle but profound.

And feminism showed that men of color and queer men experience the world differently than the straight white men who dominate MRA groups and assume all men are fundamentally the same and like them.

I realized all the arguments about male oppression I had bought into were weak. And all the evidence I needed was in feminism.

I discovered Reddit, which is a hotbed of men's rights activism, around 2009, but luckily by then I was already moving away from the movement. A lot of the stuff there was elementary, anyway.

My transformation didn't happen overnight, though. There wasn't really an "Aha!" moment, but more of a progression. I had to deconstruct all the MRA beliefs I had internalized. My classmates shuddered every time I opened my mouth. I would write these pro-men's rights arguments that I thought made sense, but my instructors would say, "This is a tautology."

At one point, I made the argument that metrosexualism was oppressive to men, that it was an attempt to feminize us because we were too hairy; because we weren't good enough as we were. One of my female peers turned to me, lifted up her skirt and said, "I shave my legs every day. Don't talk to me about the cosmetics industry oppressing men."

I ended up enrolling in a master's program for sociology. And by the end of my first semester, I realized I knew nothing. From there, it was a slow process of building.

I finished my master's in 2011, and in 2012 I started publicly identifying as a feminist. Now I'm a sociology Ph.D. candidate at the University of Victoria.

My focus is still on men (that much hasn't changed since my MRA days), but my work recognizes that the single most powerful set of tools for understanding the issues men face can be found in feminist analysis.

Despite my best efforts, I'm an idealist, and I honestly, truly believe sociology can be an activist discipline. It can teach young people how our society constructs inequality, and once we start down that road we can do something about it.

There are some MRAs who claim men's rights is akin to feminism, but that's incorrect. The men's rights movement has always been anti-feminist first, men's issues second.

Every time I look back at the men's rights movement, all I see is negativity, rage, hate, bitterness and fear. But I don't feel ashamed of my time in it. I don't even know that I regret it, because without it, I might not have ended up where I am now. It turned me on to the study of men, and eventually to feminism.

I've been dating the same woman since 2004, and, oh god, I must've gotten on her nerves back then.