

# Mama's Boy: One Son's Journey into Gender Equality

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The author, his mom, and siblings, 2019

## Christopher Hook, Promundo



· 6 min read ★

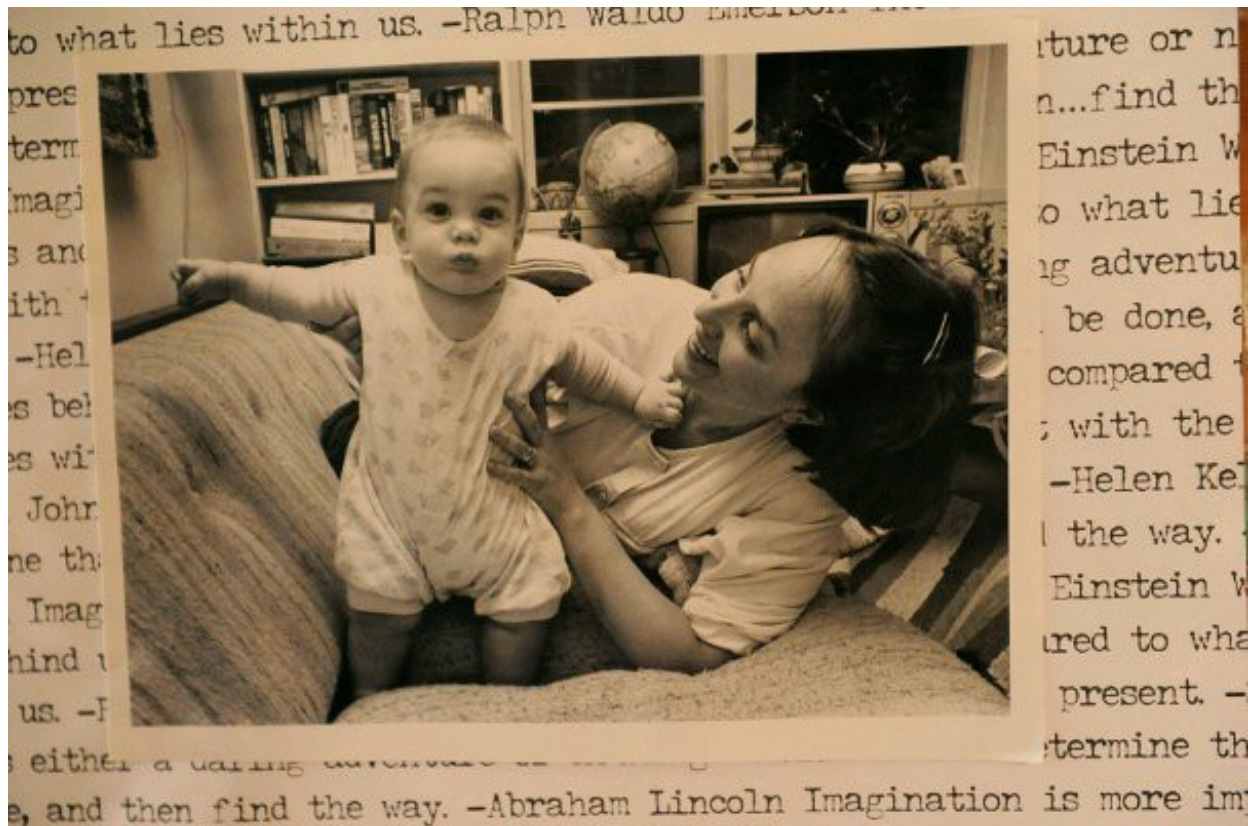


*In celebration and appreciation of the roles women play around the world, this piece presents results from of 1,201 adults 25–45 which looks at the ways men in the US are responding to calls for gender equality, and what more there is left to do.*

My mom, Debra Lynn B. Hook, has always been a role model, and not just for me. For 31 years, she's been filling the pages of newspapers all over the country with tales from the front lines of motherhood.

That means my life has been in plain view. From my first words and first steps, and those of my two siblings, from eating all my Easter candy in one sitting against her explicit instructions, to awkward phone conversations with my first girlfriend, first job, first apartment, and stumbles through young adulthood, she's reported it all. And in great detail. Now I help her edit her columns, which means I have the opportunity to delete the awkward stuff. She usually lets me.

One embarrassing moment came when I was about 12 years-old, and per usual, was avoiding my chores. She found me in the laundry pile, not folding, and took me to task. I then took it upon myself to announce my displeasure: "Fine, LADY!"



The author and his mom in their Columbia, SC home

The earth stopped spinning in that dank basement. She picked me up by the armpits and placed (would be the gentle word) me on the washing machine, at eye-level. "Don't ever talk to me like that again," she demanded. I nodded. And that was that. Once I found my breath, I did the laundry. And I learned a lesson about respect.

And so it's gone: a childhood of lessons, taught with love and wisdom, transmitted through my mother who had to learn them the hard way, herself the product of a tough-as-nails, second-generation Lebanese single mother, raising four girls on a small salary in 1960s South Carolina. My mother, the kindest, gentlest, strongest person I know, has been with me all the way, including in my choice of career.

I work for a non-profit organization, Promundo. Through education, research and advocacy, in community partnership in every corner of the globe, Promundo seeks to promote one thing: getting men on board with gender equality.

Promundo's mission is grounded in the understanding that women continue to face significant personal and professional discrimination as a result of their gender. Five percent of Fortune 500 companies CEOs are women and only 38 percent of managerial positions in the world's top 82 companies are women; across all countries, women are heads of state in only 20. Women hold fewer than 30 percent of seats in both houses of the US Congress. Around the world, women continue to do the bulk of household labor. They also face the near-omnipresent threat of sexual harassment and assault.

Importantly, the number of women and people of other marginalized gender identities, of color, who are gay, lesbian, bi, transgender, or poor — and those who live more than one of these realities — occupying positions of power is even lower, and exposure to discrimination and violence is higher.

Fortunately, this may be starting to change in small, but noticeable ways. Promundo's recent study, drawing on a nationally representative survey of millennial and Generation X men and women (ages 25–45) — alongside other research — shows there is good support among men for women as political and business leaders. There are more women than ever before in the US Congress, as mayors, in boardrooms and in the workplace. At home, three-quarters of women report their partners being supportive of their careers. And more than a year after #MeToo re-surfaced and gained notoriety, more than half of millennial and Generation X men report being more likely to take action when they see gender discrimination than they were a year ago.

### **Still, we men have a lot of work to do.**

In so many moments as a child, as I left the living room covered in Lego blocks, or the tablecloth littered in spilled Cap'n Crunch, I remember my mom, frustrated, saying what women say to their families every night, all over the world, "I wish I didn't have to keep asking you to help."

Promundo's research shows I'm not the only male who hides from housework: In our survey, at least half the women surveyed say they need more emotional support and more help with child care and household chores from their partners — and that the amount of help their partner currently provides is unfair to them. This confirms 2016 findings from the US Department of Labor and the 2019 report showing that women are spending at least 50 minutes per day more on household than their partners, and in many countries, much more.

That's where dear old Dad is implicated. Whereas my father, the self-designated "fun parent" always got to be the one to go out and play, Mom was always the one staying in, to ensure that when we traipsed back inside, faces red and clothes muddy, we had a clean house, steaming mugs of hot chocolate, and plenty of stain remover waiting. I'm not sure we ever thought about why he had this privilege — and she didn't.

**Most of us grew up in households with this inequality and didn't even notice it.** But even when we notice it, how many of us are doing anything about it? Turns out from our research, we know that most men overestimate our allyship when it comes to gender equality, whether at home or at work. In [our survey](#), while 77 percent of men said they are doing everything they can to advance gender equality in their workplaces, only 41 percent of women agreed. As humorist Hannah Gadsby pointed out in a [speech](#) at the 2018 Women in Entertainment gala, men are quick to draw the line between them, and the Harvey Weinsteins of the world. Before distancing ourselves, we all need to start with honest reflection, and hold ourselves, and each other accountable.

As individual men, and as men who have power in institutions, we can do our part to create a more even playing field, by first and foremost, opening ourselves to honest self-reflection. [Men can start by listening to women](#) and by asking ourselves, "How am I making space for the women in my life? How am I burdening them? And how can I show that I support and value women's contributions?" At work, this could mean being vocal when we hear sexist language used, or another man taking credit for a woman's idea. At home, this could mean developing a plan with my partner for divvying up the household labor. Men can also look at the media they consume and the votes they cast and ask: "How am I supporting a more equal future?"

We need to remember that social change is not a perfect, linear process. Ultimately, gender equality works for everyone, but there is power and privilege to consider in the process. Achieving equality requires us as men seeing those two things, and, along the way, some of us will have to face hard choices. If we find ourselves resisting or pushing back — we need to consider that the process of achieving gender equality is just the scales finally being evened out.

Once people all of genders are freed from unhealthy scripts that undermine relationships, genuine connection, and healthy emotionality, we will all benefit, as will our workplaces, homes, political bodies and communities. This kind of self-reflection and conversation opens the door to a transformation that is sorely-needed in a sorely-divided country.

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