

## Southern Men: Where Y'all At?

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As a tide of legislation threatening the rights of women breaks across the South, Gray Chapman challenges Southern men to get off their behinds.

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By Gray Chapman

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## Men, your fellow Southerners are in crisis. Will y'all step up?

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Two weeks ago, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp signed a bill which, should Roe v. Wade ever fall, will ban most abortions in the state. This, in a state where more women die of pregnancy and childbirth than anywhere else in the nation. Similar bills in Alabama and Missouri passed in the days following. Louisiana is likely [next](#).

For weeks, women have wept and raged and encouraged one another to donate to advocacy organizations and pro-choice funds. Louder than our cries has been the deafening silence of the men around us.

[Nineteen](#) states have proposed legislation curtailing reproductive freedom, trying to undo a legal precedent set by the U.S. Supreme Court 46 years ago. But the South — where [rural hospitals](#) are closing obstetrics wards or shuttering entirely, where pregnant women must [drive for hours](#) just to see a doctor, and where [black women in particular](#) are dying during pregnancy or childbirth in shameful and ever-growing numbers — is a terrifying place to be pregnant. There is no way around the fact that these [bills will devastate our most vulnerable neighbors](#) here in the South.

What has long been a crisis of access in the South is now an emergency. Yet, it sure feels like men can't hear the alarm bells.

No matter how many laws pass, abortion will never go away — it will only recede further [into the shadows](#), snuffing out the lives and futures and rights of women along the way. So, I'm asking my husband, my male colleagues, my guy friends, my family members, my neighbors, my fellow Southerners, and every other man reading this: How will y'all fight like hell to keep that from happening? You're with us, right?

In March, I watched a live stream as the men and women of Georgia's Senate debated HB-481. A righteously angry [speech](#) from Democratic state Sen. Jen Jordan, whose district covers Atlanta's northwestern suburbs, went viral. But most of the powerful stories that day came from black women. Another Democrat whose district covers Atlanta's eastern suburbs, Sen. Gloria Butler, bravely [rose](#) to the podium to share the story of her classmate who became pregnant as a teenager.

"My friend lived in the projects, and met her fate with a hanger," she said, standing, dressed all in white, before the Senate.

That day, women ripped their most personal stories wide open, gutting themselves at the seams on the Senate floor, hoping it would compel the men in the room to recognize their humanity. It didn't work. The male members of the Georgia Legislature ignored the pleas of their colleagues [and of their constituents](#).

In the days following the Georgia bill's passage, I shared a link about the potential implications on Facebook and — hell, why not — tacked on a "Donate" button to raise funds for Planned Parenthood Southeast. Quickly, two dozen people collectively contributed over \$1,000. Only

three were men.

One of those men was an old friend, someone I've known for years to be a good man. When I first met Luke almost 10 years ago, his North Georgia accent, which felt like an anachronism in a place like Atlanta, struck me, as did his warmth and kindness. I texted Luke to thank him, to tell him he was one of the few men in my life who'd taken action rather than just scrolling on by.

"I have a history of women in my family," he joked. And then, more seriously: "I'm now thinking about donating more."

Another man I texted that day was my husband.

"You need to tell your boys to step it up," I wrote him, trying my best not to direct every ounce of my searing anger at him (and, bless him, not really succeeding). He agreed it was a weak showing, but admitted he didn't know what to do. He felt that to speak out would be the last thing women wanted.

"Nobody wants to hear from men right now," he told me.

I think he's wrong, and I told him as much. While no women I know are eager at this moment for the unsolicited opinions of men, we need to know we are not fighting this alone. In a just world, our voices alone would be enough, but this isn't, and they aren't. We need y'all in this with us.

Many men see reproductive health as something that doesn't concern them. It's the soft, gooey girl-stuff of tampons, heavy flow days, Midol. These are "women's issues" — even though cisgender women [aren't](#) the only people who get abortions. The need for reproductive health extends across the gender spectrum, including nonbinary or transgender individuals, who often have [a harder time accessing it](#). [One in four](#) American women will have an abortion by age 45, which means most of y'all know and love more than a few women whose lives today are possible *only* thanks to the freedom they had to make choices about their own reproductive futures. It's likely, too, that a woman's abortion has helped make possible your own lives and livelihoods as you know them today.

Still, you shouldn't have to know someone affected by an issue to care about the consequences.

Many men, like my husband, say they're hesitant or just plain scared to speak up about this stuff. They feel it's not their place to say anything, or worse, that they'll say the wrong thing. That's understandable, albeit sort of a cop-out. But the whole excruciating, gross messiness of being human requires being open to criticism and learning to do better. You might fumble your words and piss off a woman. Apologize with humility, learn from it, *thank her*, and move forward with a commitment to be better. Silence may feel safer, but its implications are nefarious and far-reaching. Don't be a guy who prioritizes his personal comfort over the humanity of others.

You know we can see y'all, right? Lives and livelihoods are at stake. Constitutional and human rights — and yes, I consider sovereignty over one's own body to be a fundamental human right, and believe state-forced birth grossly violates that — are being systematically, insidiously stripped away. Abortion remains legal in the South, but should these bills withstand the coming court challenges, they will hurt all people, not just women.

Doctors — yours and ours — will flee. Teenagers' futures will be swallowed up. Women's bodies will be regulated. Southern women — particularly those with limited resources — will die. This legislation's foundation is the denial of one's own autonomy, one's own humanity. Failure to act isn't just lazy; it's inhumane.

And it isn't just the men. White women: We've long been the mercenaries of the patriarchy, knowingly or not. A fleet of good old boys may have written the legislation that would force a little girl in Alabama to carry her rapist's fetus to term, but it was a white woman governor whose hand inked it into law. Anyone who's read Margaret Atwood knows Gilead can't function without its willingly complicit Aunt Lydias, and I guarantee you all of us know at least one such otherwise well-meaning white lady. Maybe we can reach her before she does more harm. At the least, it's our responsibility to neutralize that harm in our own efforts. Every last one of us needs to be doing more, and doing better, right now.

What does that look like? Well, for starters, boys: Consider directing some of that pay-gap money y'all get to groups working to protect reproductive access and helping patients get the care they need. Funds like [ARC Southeast](#), [Yellowhammer](#), and [many more](#) enable folks living on the margins to get safe, legal abortions, and those organizations will make use of every cent you send their way. (Or [volunteer](#) your time, your gas money, or your spare bedroom.)

Commit your time and money to getting pro-choice candidates elected, and to supporting organizations working to untangle generations of voter suppression and [gerrymandering](#), like [Fair Fight](#), so that such victories are even possible.

Listen to the organizations that have organized and advocated for reproductive justice for years: [Sister Song](#), [SPARK](#), [NAF](#), [NARAL](#), [Planned Parenthood Southeast](#), and many more. These groups protect reproductive health and fill the gaps intentionally left wide-open by the states. Learn from them, defer to them, and ask them how you can support their efforts. Encourage your friends to do the same.

But don't dare feel as though that one-off \$25 donation absolves you of responsibility. We, all of us, have to be in this for the long haul. Loudly, brazenly, uncompromisingly, with as much hellfire as we can muster. Men, your voices must be part of that.

Y'all need to be talking about it. Start conversations with other men. Don't be afraid to use your words: "abortion" isn't a cuss. It's healthcare. The need for it is as old as humanity itself, and it will never go away. Spend time [reading](#) and listening to the experiences women *choose* to share, instead of expecting your women friends to share theirs. No one owes you their most personal stories in exchange for your empathy.

Ask your friends what concrete actions they plan to take as they stand with women. If they have none in mind, challenge them to think of some. Brainstorm together. After that, check in. Don't let that burden drift back to the shoulders of women. We shouldn't have to remind y'all to be good people. Think about what your mere presence at a march or a rally could signal to your buddies watching at home. I don't know if y'all realize how powerful that can be.

Educate yourselves not just on this wave of legislation, but on the history of ongoing, systemic efforts to chip away at reproductive rights. Before HB-481 and its ilk, there were (and are) mandated hospital admitting privileges; waiting periods; state-mandated counseling — a patchwork of targeted regulations designed to undermine both those who seek abortions and those who provide them. It took a law extreme enough to force a teen to carry her rapist's embryo to term to garner national headlines, but other laws already in force exist solely to make it harder for people to get the care they need. Any of y'all know what a ["crisis pregnancy center"](#) does, how to spot one, and how your tax dollars fund them? Any of y'all know how long the state forces a woman to wait to get her abortion in Alabama, or Missouri, or Tennessee? Any of y'all know, or care, about the Hyde Amendment? Time to learn.

And this should go without saying, but *vote*. Not just in the big one. Educate yourselves about local candidates; demand those candidates have clear-cut, vocal positions on a woman's right to choose. Make them come out and say it. Abortion is nowhere near as "polarizing" as politicians like to pretend — [nearly 70 percent](#) of Americans oppose overturning Roe. It is absurd that politicians still treat abortion like it's a scarlet letter. Help us hold them to higher standards.

Identify [the candidates who stand for women](#) and support them fiercely. Never forget local elections are often the most important: Just last week, district attorneys in metro Atlanta — all of them elected to their posts — [stated](#) they will refuse to prosecute women or healthcare providers for abortions if HB-481 goes into effect.

Most of all, make a conscious choice to be in this fight with women. It's an unholy mix of cowardice and cruelty to look the other way while the lives and rights of your fellow Southerners are at risk, to remain quiet while leaving your most vulnerable neighbors to fend for themselves on the front lines.

That's not what good men stand for.

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