

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# SAYING ABORTION ALOUD:

Research and Recommendations for Public  
Abortion Storytellers and Organizations

Written by Renee Bracey Sherman  
and the Sea Change Program



Renee Bracey Sherman, far right, sharing her abortion story.



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## Background

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Story sharing is a widely used method of communication to change hearts and minds about abortion. It is a way in which people who have had abortions can talk about the nuances of their decision-making with those who have not had abortions, in hope of finding common ground, creating understanding, and building compassion around abortion experiences. While it is a preferred strategy for change, few of the 40 million US women<sup>1</sup> who have had abortions are willing to share their stories publicly due to the stigma and public shaming that is often experienced as a result.

To learn more about how organizations can support abortion storytellers, the Sea Change Program conducted a survey and interviews with public abortion storytellers about their experiences and needs for support. Public abortion story sharing is defined as sharing in an outlet or event that is accessible to the general public for attendance and comment. This includes public workshops or events, articles and videos in the media, political office visits and testimony, and public education campaigns about abortion experiences. This report outlines our basic findings and recommendations for supporting public abortion storytellers.

Going into this project, we believed that if organizations are able to clearly articulate what support systems are in place for new storytellers, more people will be willing to share their stories publicly on an ongoing basis. We also believed that if organizations are clear in their valuing of abortion storytellers, are transparent about what the storytelling process might entail, and are reliable in offering ongoing support to storytellers, then storytellers will be empowered to share more often and openly, will feel supported and cared for by the organizations they partner with, will feel ownership over their experiences, and most importantly, will feel like honored and valued leaders in the reproductive health, rights, and justice movements.

The first goal of this report is to support abortion storytellers in exploring how they would like to share their stories, what support they might need to have a positive sharing experience, and what they can ask of organizations they partner with. The second goal of this report is to make organizations aware of the array of ways they can support storytellers to effectively share their abortion stories in the media, at events, and before politicians.

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<sup>1</sup> While research shows that 40 million US women have had abortions since 1973, we know that gender-nonconforming people and trans men also seek abortion care. There is currently no publicly available data on abortion rates among these groups.

## Methods

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Our research collected qualitative and quantitative information using a survey conducted through Google Forms. We also conducted in-depth qualitative interviews in person, by phone, and via videoconference.

The survey participants were recruited via email, social media, contact with organizations that do abortion storytelling work, and word of mouth. Eligibility was based on having had an abortion and spoken about it in a public manner with people the storyteller did not know personally. We aimed to have a wide representation of respondents across age, race, geographic area, religious beliefs or spiritual identity, and experience with sharing their abortion story. In the survey, we gathered self-reported demographic data and asked about the storytellers' experiences with story sharing and with receiving support from organizations or professional advocates.

We also conducted eight in-depth interviews with public abortion storytellers, who were selected based on their responses in the survey. We conducted five additional in-depth interviews with advocates and personal storytellers from other movements concerned with stigmatized experiences. These interviewees were identified by colleagues as leaders in public storytelling practices. The goal of both sets of interviews was to gain insight into their experiences and needs for support from movement advocates.

## Findings

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In all, 39 eligible people participated in the survey and 13 people participated in in-depth interviews. Demographic data on the survey respondents is available in Table 1 in the appendix. Further, eight interviews were conducted with people who had shared their abortion stories publicly, and another five interviews were conducted with personal storytellers and advocates around other stigmatized life experiences (including rape, teen pregnancy and parenting, marginalized sexual orientation and gender identity, and living with HIV). While our data is limited because it is not from a randomized sample representative of all storytellers, it does paint a picture of a wide range of experiences in public abortion story sharing.

Through the online survey and in-depth interviews, we found that most abortion storytellers are satisfied with their story sharing experiences. Most found that sharing their abortion stories with the public was healing for themselves and others, gave them a way to participate in the abortion rights movement, and presented an opportunity to change the narrative about people who have abortions. See Table 2 for data on the abortion storytelling experiences of survey participants.

After sharing their stories publicly, respondents noted that they experienced both positive and negative feedback, but the positive outweighed the negative. Most respondents (69%) stated that anonymous positive responses after sharing helped them feel good about their sharing experience, in particular when the feedback came from other people who had had abortions and from their own friends and family. Abortion storytellers were worried about negative reactions from family members and friends; backlash in their community; and threats via online comments, on social media, and in person. See Table 3 for survey respondents' accounting of the positive feedback and negative comments they received after sharing their abortion stories publicly.

When asked about personal challenges in sharing their abortion stories, respondents noted that they had felt anxiety about public speaking; worries about their family members learning of their abortions; worries about their community's reaction; fear of public shaming and harassment; and their own self-doubt about sharing. These challenges are a barrier to cultivating new abortion storytellers, in particular for those living in more conservative communities. To surmount these challenges, abortion storytellers employed several coping mechanisms, including finding in-person support from an organization, family members, and friends; talking to a counselor or therapist; and journaling, meditation, and prayer. Most storytellers noted that sharing their story was a form of self-care and opportunity for reflection; thus, continuing to speak out helped to alleviate the challenges. Despite the significant challenges around sharing an abortion story, 36 out of 39 respondents (92%) said that they would continue to share their stories publicly.

When asked about organizational support, a plurality of respondents (41%) said that they had received little to no support from the organization with whom they partnered to share their story. Several respondents noted that they didn't know they could ask for any support. Others did have support, and they stated that in-person support — such as the presence of a staff member, friend, or family member during the story sharing — was crucial. They also described other useful support, such as help writing or rehearsing their story or testimony; media training; support group availability; and opportunities for continued engagement. Several respondents said that they received an expression of thanks from the partnering organization for sharing their story; however, others noted that they felt unacknowledged for their contribution. Over half of the respondents (59%) were unsure of the type of support they wanted from organizations. This guide will help storytellers clarify what type of support they can request. Of those who shared what type of support they would like from organizations, several control over their own story, follow-up after sharing, and guidance on their

writing. See Table 4 for more details from respondents regarding what support they received from organizations to share their stories and what support they desire from organizations.

## Recommendations for Storytellers

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Based on our findings, we created a set of recommendations for storytellers who are thinking about sharing their abortion stories publicly. We believe that the recommendations will help them advocate for their needs to create more positive public sharing experiences. Details on these recommendations are available in our guide for storytellers, available on the Sea Change Program's website: [seachangeprogram.org](http://seachangeprogram.org).

### General Support

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Storytellers should be made aware of the types of support they can request from organizations when sharing their abortion stories. This includes guidance on writing and messaging, explanation in advance of how legislative hearings or events will proceed, and clear information about whom they can contact within the organization.

### Story Ownership

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Storytellers must know that their story is just that: theirs. They must know that they can and should share their truth, and not simply reiterate an organization's talking points. Storytellers must always feel that they are in control of their own story and experience.

### Ongoing Support and Consent

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It's important that storytellers consider what forms of support they want from an organization they partner with — before, during and after the act of sharing. They also must know that even if they provide consent to an organization to share their story, their consent must be obtained again at each storytelling opportunity. Just because they shared their story once does not mean they have to share it again.

### Compensation

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Often storytellers are treated as volunteers and are not given compensation for the work and time they give when sharing their stories. If they desire it, storytellers should be compensated for this work they do on behalf of an organization, even if it's simply reimbursement for travel expenses. Storytellers must know that their work and contributions are valued.

## Media Support

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Sharing abortion stories can be an exhilarating experience, but it also comes with privacy challenges. Storytellers can ask a partnering organization to field reporter calls, keep their names and personal information off the Internet, and report harassment on their behalf.

## Recommendations for Organizations

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Based on our findings, we also created recommendations for organizations and advocates who support public abortion storytellers. With a clear set of guidelines, advocates can offer a variety of forms of support to ensure the storytellers have a positive experience. Details on these recommendations are available in our guide for advocates, available on the Sea Change Program's website: [seachangeprogram.org](http://seachangeprogram.org).

## Supporting Full Stories

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When working with storytellers, advocates must learn to support storytellers in sharing their whole truths and stories, not just the parts that fit within the organization's campaign. Stories don't always fit into neat boxes or taglines.

## Recognizing the Intersectionality of Identities

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Having an abortion is one piece of someone's full life experience. Other issues and identities often influence how someone processed or understood their experience of abortion. These issues might include, but are not limited to: their race, ethnicity, or nationality; their sexuality, gender identity or expression; their class background, family, citizenship status, mental illness, disabilities, intimate partner violence, sexual assault or abuse, substance use, and their other pregnancy experiences. As an advocate, you can help storytellers frame the elements of their story in the context of their abortion, but you should not censor their story. These are identities that people who have abortions inhabit, and it's important to acknowledge the full breadth of who they are.

## Preparing Storytellers

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Storytellers aren't always media experts. They need support in crafting their message, writing their stories, and speaking in front of audiences. Advocates must offer training for storytellers that goes beyond basic media messaging training. Rather than assuming knowledge — of how to pitch an opinion editorial, compose a tweet, or write a bio, for example — asking if the storyteller needs support or training will go a long way in making them feel supported.

## Privacy Support

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Abortion stigma — the shared understanding that abortion is morally wrong and/or socially unacceptable — is pervasive in our society. This means that people who have abortions are heavily stigmatized and may experience harassment once they speak publicly about their experience. Advocates should offer support to storytellers, such as fielding media requests, reporting harassing behavior to authorities, and giving guidance on how storytellers can prevent their private information from becoming public. They should also offer storytellers the option to share their story under a pseudonym or anonymously, to reduce the risk of harassment.

## Compensation

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Storytellers offer organizations something valuable: real-life testimony of the organization's mission, vision, and values. They are exposing themselves to the public and changing hearts and minds in a way that no data or infographic ever could. Because they are so crucial to culture change, storytellers must be compensated for their work. Advocates should compensate storytellers in the same way they would an event speaker or workshop presenter. Some organizations won't have the budget to offer a storyteller an honorarium, but the least they can offer is a stipend for the storyteller's time or travel. Storytellers should not be paying out of pocket to support an organization's mission.

## Ongoing Engagement

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In our survey, storytellers noted that organizations often asked them to share their story and then didn't follow up after the experience or offer other ways to engage in the organization's work. Organizations should consider different ways for storytellers to stay engaged with the organization and their community. Advocates must harness that positive energy for social change.

## Support and Defense During Harassment

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Public abortion storytellers face harassment, both online and off, when sharing their stories. Advocates who ask storytellers to share publicly must be ready to have their back afterward, whether by fielding media calls to them or by reaching out to police in cases of threats.

**To read the detailed reports on our research and recommendations for public abortion storytellers and for organizations, visit [seachangeprogram.org](http://seachangeprogram.org).**



## **Acknowledgements to Contributors**

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Thank you so much to the 39 people who shared their abortion experiences with us in our survey. Their wisdom, experiences, and ideas truly guided this process. Thank you to Monica Canfield-Lenfest, Olivia Ford of Positive Women's Network, Liza Fuentes, Emily Letts, Mikki Kendall, Natalia Koss-Vallejo, Melissa Madera, Gloria Malone, Ross Murray of GLAAD, Sonya Renee, Vanessa Riley, Katie Stack, and Wagatwe Wanjuki for taking the time to share their story sharing best practices through extensive interviews and conversations. We are truly grateful for their voices and perspectives. We would also like to thank Exhale for their pioneering work in ethical storytelling. Their work laid the foundation upon which we conducted our research and developed these recommendations.

## **About Renee Bracey Sherman**

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Renee Bracey Sherman is a reproductive justice and storytelling activist who shares her own abortion experience to encourage others who have had abortions to speak out and end the silence and stigma. Renee is a member of Echoing Ida, a project of Forward Together that amplifies the voices of Black women around critical social justice issues. Renee's work has been featured on BBC Radio World Newshour, EBONY, Fusion, Salon, TIME, The Atlantic, RH Reality Check, and Feministing.com. In 2013, Renee received the Justice Award from ACCESS Women's Health Justice for her volunteer work providing shelter and transportation to women traveling 4-5 hours for their abortions. Previously, Renee worked with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allied youth as they shared their stories with California policymakers to pass landmark anti-bullying, gender identity, and LGBT education legislation. Renee holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Cornell University. She currently sits on the board of NARAL Pro-Choice America Foundation. Renee would like to thank her parents for teaching her to always speak her truth — no matter what.

## **About the Sea Change Program**

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The Sea Change Program is dedicated to transforming the culture of stigma around abortion and other stigmatized reproductive experiences. We conduct social science research and partner with organizations to identify, test, and share practices for reducing reproductive stigmas. We seek a world that upholds the dignity and humanity of people as they move through their reproductive lives. We work to increase the visibility of marginalized reproductive experiences, strengthen connections between people, reproductive health care providers, and their communities. Learn more about The Sea Change Program at [seachangeprogram.org](http://seachangeprogram.org).



## Appendix

**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants  
(n = 39)**

	n (%)
<b>Age Group (years)</b>	
20-29	7 (18%)
30-39	16 (41%)
40-49	8 (21%)
50-59	5 (13%)
>60	3 (8%)
<b>Geographic Location</b>	
Northeast	5 (13%)
Mid-Atlantic	5 (13%)
South	13 (33%)
Midwest	8 (21%)
West Coast	5 (13%)
Outside US	3 (8%)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Asian	1 (3%)
Black	4 (10%)
Latina	6 (15%)
Middle Eastern	1 (3%)
Mixed Race	4 (10%)
No Answer	1 (3%)
White	22 (56%)
<b>Gender identity</b>	
Cisgender	38 (97%)
Non-binary	1 (3%)
<b>Number of abortions</b>	
One	27 (69%)
Two	9 (23%)
Three	2 (5%)
Four	0
Five	1 (3%)
<b>Age at Abortions<sup>2</sup> (years)</b>	
15-19	8 (21%)
20-29	18 (46%)
30-39	19 (49%)
40-49	4 (10%)

<sup>2</sup> Sum exceeds 100% because some respondents had more than one abortion.

**Table 2: Abortion Storytelling Experience of Survey Participants  
(n = 39)**

	n (%)
<b>Number of years sharing story publicly</b>	
Less than one year	6 (15%)
One to two years	8 (21%)
Three to five years	12 (31%)
Six to nine years	5 (13%)
Ten to 14 years	1 (3%)
15+ years	2 (5%)
No answer	5 (13%)
<b>How long after abortion did they begin sharing publicly</b>	
Less than one year	12 (31%)
One to two years	8 (21%)
Three to five years	6 (15%)
Six to nine years	4 (10%)
Ten to 14 years	2 (5%)
15+ years	7 (18%)
<b>How story was shared<sup>3</sup></b>	
Writing	38 (97%)
Video	8 (21%)
Congressional visit	12 (31%)
Radio, TV, or newspaper	13 (33%)
Panel or workshop	17 (44%)
Social media	4 (10%)
In person, other	5 (13%)
Non-profit campaign	11 (28%)
<b>Reasons for sharing</b>	
Desire to share	6 (15%)
Decrease isolation	3 (8%)
Political issue	12 (31%)
Media asked	1 (3%)
Wanted to show a new narrative	16 (41%)
Organization asked	3 (8%)
Cathartic experience	7 (18%)
No answer	1 (3%)

<sup>3</sup> Sum exceeds 100% because respondents could give multiple answers.

**Table 3: Sources of Positive and Negative Support After Sharing Abortion Story Publicly (n = 39)**

	n (%)
<b>Sources of positive support<sup>4</sup></b>	
Online comments	20 (69%)
Friends	8 (21%)
Family	8 (21%)
Organizational staff	6 (15%)
None	3 (8%)
<b>Sources of negative responses</b>	
Online comments	11(28%)
Strangers in person	8 (21%)
Family	6 (15%)
Friends	4 (10%)
Threats	3 (8%)
Social media	3 (8%)
Community	2 (5%)
Anti-abortion websites	2 (5%)

<sup>4</sup> Sum exceeds 100% because respondents could give multiple answers.

**Table 4: Support Received and Desired by Storytellers from Organizations  
(n = 39)**

	n (%)
<b>Received<sup>5</sup></b>	
None	16 (41%)
In-person during storytelling	6 (15%)
Testimony preparation	4 (10%)
A "thank you"	4 (10%)
Support groups	3 (8%)
Media preparation	3 (8%)
Continued engagement	2 (5%)
Social media support	1 (3%)
<b>Desired<sup>6</sup></b>	
Unsure	23 (59%)
Control over my story	6 (15%)
Follow-up after event	3 (8%)
Acknowledgment	2 (5%)
Feedback on speaking or writing	2 (5%)
Coordination between organizations	1 (3%)
Guide on sharing stories	1 (3%)
Tips on security	1 (3%)

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<sup>5,6</sup> Sum exceeds 100% because respondents could give multiple answers.