

SAYING ABORTION ALOUD:

Research and Recommendations for Organizations on How to Support Abortion Storytellers

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and the Sea Change Program



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



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Background of the Project

Storytelling is an art. It is a way of sharing oneself deeply with others. It is a way to connect with strangers around the world, sometimes around a shared experience, while other times around a new one. Storytelling is a way to challenge narratives in society and speak out for one's community. It is a tool that many organizations employ to convey the impact of policies, our intersectional struggles, and our visions for the future. It is a powerful tool, but also one that must be handled with care.

My first experiences with storytelling as a form of organizational communication were as an advocate working at a nonprofit serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and allied youth leaders. In my role, I prepared young people to share their stories — of coming out, experiencing school bullying, and accessing support services — through fundraising campaigns and before state lawmakers considering new legislation. I played a dual role: I was a staff member who supported and prepared youth to speak publicly about their lives, but I was also an adult ally who wanted to make sure the youth completely consented to sharing their story each and every time and that they understood their work's impact on their lives, their families, and their futures. Using great care, I spoke frankly with young people about who would see their beaming smiles and read their words on fundraising flyers, at rallies, and on our organization's website. I always let them see what I was creating with their image to ensure they felt honored and accurately represented. Most importantly, I wanted them to know that I had their back, and they could change their mind at any point, no questions asked. It was their story. They were in control.

After being inspired by the youth I worked with, I realized it was time for me to step out of the shadows and start speaking out about an experience in my own life: my decision to have an abortion. For six long years, I'd been pretending like I hadn't had an abortion, because of the way in which our society shames and stigmatizes those who do. I knew there were other people who had had abortions, but felt lonely because it seemed none of them were talking about it in my community. Today, I have shared my story widely — from the steps of the Supreme Court of the United States to classrooms and living rooms across the country. I have received private notes and hugs in thanks for sharing, and a few death threats. I have heard personal abortion stories and talked to strangers about how they can be allies to their loved ones who've had abortions.

Over the years, I have given advice to new abortion storytellers, brainstormed with advocates about innovative ways of sharing, and heard the good, the bad, and the

ugly from other abortion storytellers. I want to share the lessons that I have learned, as both a storyteller and an advocate, and facilitate a path where the storyteller can feel ownership and empowerment over their experience, and advocates can honor the storytellers by offering them a sense of what to expect, transparency, and support.

In creating this guide, I surveyed 39 people who have shared their abortion stories publicly and conducted 13-in depth interviews with abortion storytellers, storytellers in other movements, and advocates who work with stigmatized storytellers. Through the interviews, I've compiled the experiences and best practices of public abortion storytellers from across the country and from other movements. This guide is intended to support both storytellers and advocates in a conversation about consent, self-care, privacy, and ongoing support during the process of sharing abortion stories. I recognize that not everyone will want to share their abortion story publicly. That's totally okay. This guide is meant for those who want to do so, and want support in doing so.

With this guide, it is my hope that new storytellers will feel better prepared and supported to share their abortion stories publicly, and advocates will have a wider array of support options to offer storytellers. As we build this partnership, we can create safer spaces for untold stories to flourish, and stigma can subside.

Note: This guide uses gender-neutral language and aims to be inclusive of genderqueer and transgender people who have abortions and share their stories publicly.

What is public abortion storytelling?

“There aren't a lot of trans people sharing how reproductive justice affects them. I wanted to be visible.”

We define public abortion story sharing or storytelling as sharing an experience with abortion in an outlet or event that is accessible to the general public for comment, sharing, and attendance. This can include articles and videos in the media, public workshops or events, political office visits and testimony, and public education campaigns about abortion experiences. Organizations often use stories for fundraising requests, media pieces, and political asks to demonstrate the impact of their work or of legislation on community members. An audience is more likely to react with empathy to a complex person who shares a vulnerable experience with which they can identify than to lobbyist with talking points.

This type of storytelling is different from private abortion storytelling, which often occurs among friends or family, because it involves people whom the storyteller doesn't know. Because there isn't a relationship between the storytellers and their audience, it can increase vulnerability for the storyteller and open them up to judgment and harassment. While this is also true for those who share their abortion stories privately, once a person shares publicly, they don't always have control of who hears the story, how their words might be changed, and where their story is used in the future.

How Do Storytellers Decide to Share?

Those who share their abortion stories publicly do so for a number of reasons; sometimes it's to be heard when they feel silenced by society, to speak openly about a joyous or painful experience, to let others know they're not alone, or to dispel myths and misinformation. Whatever a person's reasons for sharing, as an advocate, you should make sure that the storyteller is at the center of them. As an advocate, you should ask a storyteller why they want to share and help them meet these goals in a way that feels most authentic for them. Advocates should also remind storytellers that they don't have to share their story if they don't want to. There are myriad ways to get involved with reproductive health, rights, and justice organizations. Sharing a personal abortion story is just one way.

"I was angry at the way women are made to feel shamed by making the choice to have an abortion and wanted to lend a voice to help destigmatize abortion."
– Survey respondent

While thinking about a storyteller's goals for sharing, advocates can support them in thinking about the places in which they do, and don't, want to share their story. Does the storyteller feel most comfortable writing their story on a parenting blog? Or would they like to speak to people at a local event where they can interact with people? These are just a few examples. An advocate should help storytellers consider their personal comfort level with various outlets. If a storyteller doesn't like speaking in public, perhaps writing or recording their story is the best medium. If the storyteller prefers having conversations or wants to speak publicly, then better opportunities for them might be events, workshops, political lobby days and legislative hearings. Advocates should remind storytellers that each outlet has its benefits and challenges.

As you help storytellers craft their message, also encourage them to think about the things they *never* want to share publicly. What parts of their story do they want to keep private? What venues do they never want their story shared in? Perhaps they want to

think about how others in their story might be portrayed. There may be people, and especially people's names, that they want to leave out of their story. Tell the storyteller that they can always revisit this list, add new things, or take some things off as time goes by. Always remind them that as storytellers, they are in control of their story. They don't have to share any part of a story they don't want to. Sometimes storytellers can feel pressure to share. Reminding them that they are in control is important.

How Can Organizations Be Supportive?

Organizations and advocates are key to a good experience in sharing one's abortion story publicly. In our surveys, those who had good experiences with sharing credited it to feeling prepared to share, having in-person support throughout the process, and knowing that the organizations they were sharing through had their back — especially when they experienced negativity and harassment. Storytellers are sharing deeply personal aspects of their lives. This takes an incredible amount of courage, vulnerability, and support. Ensuring advocates have the tools to support storytellers is essential to culture change and the storyteller's wellbeing. Advocates may want to take an inventory of what types of support they are able to offer and present this to storytellers when approaching them for a project. Ask the storyteller open-ended questions about what types of support they need. Center the storyteller in the process. Some storytellers will need more support than others. The conversation about support should be ongoing and revisited at every project. Not every sharing opportunity is the same, and opportunities might occur at different points in a storyteller's life. Their needs may change and advocates must be ready to support those needs. By listening, you show the storyteller that you have their best interests at heart and you are truly willing to invest in their wellbeing.

Supporting Full Stories

No two abortion experiences are the same. 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. Abortion stories are complex, nuanced, and don't always fit into neat boxes or taglines. That's okay. When working with your storyteller, describe to them the goal of your organization's campaign and how it matches up with the highlights of their story. Provided with full transparency, storytellers can decide how they'd like to share their story to support your organization's goals. Sometimes, parts won't perfectly line up, but the important part is

"The one time my story was shared by a national organization, they told the story *they* wanted to tell instead of my story." – Survey

that the storyteller is at the center of the process, their experiences heard, and their contribution valued.

Advocates must also be aware that stigma and intersectional issues affect how a story is told — and heard. Race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, place of residence, immigration status, education level, physical appearance, and age all have an impact on how, if, when, and why someone shares, or doesn't share, their story. Harassment of abortion storytellers is quite common, and can be more intense depending on a storyteller's skin color, gender identity, or other markers. For example, speaking out about one's abortion as an undocumented immigrant or as a trans person can make the experience scarier and the attacks more fierce and frequent, because the storyteller is speaking out about not just their abortion but also their other stigmatized identities. As an advocate, be sensitive to these issues. Understand that the storyteller knows what's best for their life. Ask them what type of support they need and check in with them often to see if and how they are dealing with personal attacks.

Recognizing the Intersectionality of Identities

An important thing to consider when approaching storytellers is the diversity of speakers. Are you making room for new speakers to join the usual crowd of storytellers? Are you lifting up a racially and ethnically diverse set of voices? Have you provided space for a queer, disabled, undocumented, or poor person to share their story? Fighting abortion stigma is more than sharing abortion stories — it's about elevating a range of experiences and identities. For example, when advocates challenge abortion restrictions that are based on gestational age, they often highlight stories of fetal anomaly or life-threatening pregnancy. Those stories matter. And so do the stories about people who couldn't get to the clinic sooner because they had to save up money to pay for their abortion care, or those who experienced bureaucratic delays at the Medicaid office. When we show a spectrum of stories, it reminds people of the complexity of abortion and the nuances within each story. Experiences are never the same. The narratives shouldn't be either.

When it comes to nuances, storytellers may want to discuss how multiple issues and identities affected their abortion experience. It's important that you allow them to share that, should they want to. It is the reality of their life.

Issues that may have affected their abortion experience or decision 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, sexual assault or abuse, intimate partner violence, substance use, and other pregnancy experiences. As an advocate, you can help them 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

Often, storytellers are just regular people; your storyteller might not be a media maven. But they can become one! They may need support in crafting their message, writing their stories, and speaking in front of audiences. Advocates must offer training for storytellers, beyond basic media messaging training. Teach storytellers

"They took time to walk me through what the process would be, how I might anticipate hurtful questions, and where there might be potential minefields, all the while reiterating that it was my story to tell."

how to clearly answer questions to avoid their statements being misconstrued. Explain to them the mechanics of a lobby visit — don't assume they know. Remind them they don't have to answer every question a reporter asks. Never let them forget that they are in charge of the situation. The more information a storyteller receives about the process and what to expect, the more comfortable they will feel sharing.

Advocates shouldn't assume storytellers have knowledge or experience in this arena. Not everyone understands how to pitch an opinion editorial to a newspaper, compose a catchy tweet, or write a short bio. When asking storytellers to complete tasks, ask if they need help or want to see an example of what you're looking for. This saves them from feeling too intimidated to say, "I don't know how to do that." In our interview, one abortion storyteller said she felt embarrassed to admit that she didn't know how to write a bio, didn't have "professional" clothing for an event, wasn't sure what to wear, and didn't have the money to buy new clothes. She felt too intimidated to ask the organization, because she didn't want anyone to laugh at her. Simply asking the storyteller if they need support or training goes a long way in making them feel valued and saves them from having to say they don't know how to do something.

Privacy Support

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 they might experience harassment and estrangement from their community once they speak publicly about their abortion. To alleviate their stress, advocates can step in to offer support such as fielding media requests, reporting harassing behavior to authorities, and showing the storyteller how to prevent private information from becoming public. Offering to field media requests

for abortion storytellers takes the pressure off of them to say yes to things they may not want to do, and allows advocates to help them distinguish the legitimate requests from anti-abortion advocates with bad intentions. When an organization fields the requests, it keeps the storyteller from having to release their private phone number or email address — this is very meaningful in protecting their privacy. Give the storyteller your media team’s email address and phone number, and tell them to direct all requests to your organization if they don’t want to handle them on their own.

Another issue that several storytellers brought up in our survey and interviews was the ease with which people could find them on the Internet by merely looking up their names. Some storytellers want to share their stories, but would like to maintain a bit of everyday privacy for themselves and their families. If a storyteller is concerned about this, offer them the option to share their story under a pseudonym, their first name only, or anonymously, to reduce the storyteller’s risk of experiencing harassment. This is especially important if the storyteller has an uncommon, and thus easily searchable, name. Advocates may want to talk to storytellers about omitting other identifying details, such as location, school names, and employers, from their story to help protect their identity. On the other hand, some storytellers are perfectly happy using their full name and potentially being identifiable — which is great, too. The point is to offer the full menu of options to cater to the storyteller’s needs.

“I am more than willing to share my story but don't really want it to be Google-able under my name. I don't see why random people should read my story out of idle interest.”

Compensation

Storytellers are offering organizations something valuable: real life testimony of the organization’s mission, vision, and values. They are baring 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 and embody the organization’s mission, storytellers must be compensated for their work, time, and energy. By offering some type of compensation, you are showing the storyteller that you value their expertise. At some point, organizations are going to count the storyteller’s story in a funder report, use their photo in a donation solicitation, have them speak at a fundraising event. Be sure that your fundraising and use of their story are coming from a just place, which includes compensating them for their work.

Advocates should compensate storytellers in the same way they would an event speaker or workshop presenter. Build an honorarium or stipend into your campaign or

event budget. Advocates shouldn't expect that a storyteller will, or can afford to, give away their time and talents for free. Storytellers are valuable to the movement; show them that. Some organizations don't have the budget to offer a storyteller an honorarium, but at the least they can offer to cover the storyteller's costs. Can you compensate for their gas money? Can you pay for their bus ticket to get to the event? Can you offer a small stipend for their time? Storytellers should not be going into debt to support your organization's mission. Even a small gesture of appreciation, and understanding that not everyone is at a financial level to do their work pro bono, is huge. It all comes back to showing you value their important work. After all, it's why you want them to be part of your project.

Ongoing Engagement

In our survey, storytellers noted that organizations often asked them to share their story then didn't follow up after the experience or offer other ways for the storyteller to be involved. Once someone shares their abortion story and has a good experience, they're likely to want to continue supporting the organization or the movement. Organizations should think about different ways in which storytellers can continue to stay engaged with the organization and their community. Advocates must harness that positive energy and enthusiasm for social change.

Organizations often use multi-pronged approaches to tackle challenging issues. Have a menu of options for how someone can engage, in various ways and at varying levels of intensity or frequency. This allows abortion storytellers to grow in their experiences, try new strategies for reducing abortion stigma, and play a role in culture shift. An organization that offers a varied range of participation opportunities gives storytellers different entry points into the movement. Think about different approaches to sharing your message, and then pinpoint ways that abortion storytellers can get involved beyond speaking to the media or writing their story for an opinion editorial.

Support and Defense During Harassment

Public abortion storytellers face harassment, both online and off, when sharing their stories. Harassment ranges from nasty comments on a website article to death threats and the exposure of private information. It can be terrifying. Advocates who ask storytellers to share publicly must be ready to have their back when things get rough.

Advocates should make all storytellers aware of the possibility of harassment. Pretending it doesn't happen, or not informing the storyteller of this risk, is

"Organizations want me to speak up [about my abortion], but they don't have any mechanisms for protecting people who do speak up."
"

insulting and not at all transparent. Most of the abortion storytellers in our survey said that they continued speaking out in the face of harassment, but wanted to feel like the organizations they were partnering with had their back and were honest about what could happen once they shared their story. When fully informed, storytellers can prepare themselves and their family for whatever may come.

As previously noted, fielding media calls is an important way that organizations can support storytellers. Another is to track anti-choice blogs, and the web in general (using search alert or monitoring services), to keep an inventory of the information that is being spread online about the storyteller. It's easier for the storyteller's emotions and mental state if an outsider does this for them. Offer it as part of your support menu.

Another form of support advocates can offer is to reach out to local authorities or the FBI in cases of threats. Receiving death threats or threats of violence after sharing an abortion story can make the storyteller feel powerless and scared. As an advocate, you must help shoulder the harassment, especially because you have asked them to share their story for your cause. Check in with them before, several times during, and again after the project. Have them forward all instances of threats to you, and work with local authorities to protect the storyteller's privacy and safety. Many marginalized communities have negative experiences with police, so some storytellers are less likely to want to report harassment or threats to police. Take the lead of the storyteller and do as they ask. One way to be supportive is by advocating for them when dealing with the authorities, because their experiences should be documented and their voices heard, and because authorities are more likely to listen to organizational leaders than to individuals.

Advocates should also have a conversation with storytellers about self-care. Ask them if they have a self-care routine. Encourage them to take breaks. Do they have a supportive network? As an advocate, you should also have a number of abortion storytellers that you work with, to help storytellers avoid burnout and to give them a break. They aren't superhuman — just amazing, brave people with an incredible story, who need a break sometimes.

Conclusion

Sharing a story, especially one about a stigmatized identity or experience, can be both awesome and hard. It brings up lots of emotions, thoughts, and challenges. It changes the storyteller's life. As an advocate, you are bearing witness to their moment, a moment when their life changes. It is a humbling honor that comes with great

responsibility. The way in which you support, care for, and encourage them will impact their experience deeply.

Advocates are crucial to helping storytellers process their story, share it with the public, and bond with others who have had abortions around the world. Storytelling is a process, not a single act — and the more transparent and thoughtful you are about the process and what you and your organization can offer the storyteller, the more satisfied they can feel with the experience. More people will want to work with you in sharing their story when they see that you treat storytellers with respect and dignity. When we do that, we can reach our goal: ensuring everyone can share their truth powerfully, honestly, and free of shame and stigma.

Talk-Line Resources

Sharing an abortion story can usher in a range of emotions for storytellers — including bringing up aspects of their abortion experience that they may not want to share publicly, dealing with personal relationship challenges after their decision to speak publicly, and hearing many more abortion stories from people who want to share with them. Should a storyteller ever need to talk about their experiences to someone other than the organizational advocates or their personal circle of friends and family, advocates can point them to several organizations that can support them.

Often, other people hearing an abortion story feel moved to share their own abortion experience with a storyteller or organization. They may also want a trained counselor to speak with. To that end, the resources offered by the organizations below (described in their own words) can also be shared with community members, other advocates, and people who have had abortions who contact the organization and storyteller as a result of the public sharing.

Backline promotes unconditional and judgment-free support for people in all their decisions, feelings and experiences with pregnancy, parenting, adoption and abortion. Through direct service and social change strategies, Backline is building a world where all people can make the reproductive decisions that are best for their lives, without coercion or limitation, and where the dignity of lived experiences is affirmed and honored.

Website: YourBackline.org

Phone: (888) 493-0092, M-Th 5-10pm PST, F-Su 10am-3pm PST



Faith Aloud is the religious and ethical voice for reproductive justice. Faith Aloud receives phone calls from women across the country who are seeking spiritual counseling before and after abortion. Counselors and medical professionals often hear women express their spiritual concerns about abortion. Many women have felt shame and stigma forced on them by their religious groups, their families, and the society. Faith Aloud trains clergy who want to provide women with the spiritual comfort of knowing that God is with them through all things.

Website: FaithAloud.org

Phone: 888-717-5010

Support in English and Español

Other Ways to Share

There are many ways to share an abortion story, and some are more public than others. All are valid and important. Depending on an abortion storyteller's life situation and comfort level, they may want to choose a less public way of sharing. Below are a few outlets where they can share their story through writing, via video, under a pseudonym, or anonymously. Advocates should tell storytellers to keep this list handy for others they meet who want to listen to and share abortion stories.

Advocates for Youth's 1 in 3 Campaign is a grassroots movement to start a new conversation about abortion—telling our stories, on our own terms. Visit 1in3campaign.org to learn more.

The Abortion Diary is a space for people to speak out against the shame, stigma, secrecy and isolation surrounding abortion by generating, sharing and receiving personal stories. People share their personal stories, and empower others to give testimony about their personal experiences and choices surrounding abortion. Visit theabortiondiarypodcast.com to learn more.

Emerge is a discussion and support group for women who have had an abortion. Women who participate in the group meet weekly to share and discuss their individual experiences in a safe, respectful and supportive environment with other women. Visit prochoiceresources.org for more information.

Exhale creates a social climate where each person's unique experience with abortion is supported, respected, and free from stigma. Exhale provides services, training, and education to empower individuals, families, and communities to achieve post-abortion health and wellbeing. Visit exhaleprovoice.org to learn more.

NARAL Pro-Choice America's mission is to develop and sustain a constituency that uses the political process to guarantee every woman the right to make personal decisions regarding the full range of reproductive choices, including preventing unintended pregnancy, bearing healthy children, and choosing legal abortion. Visit prochoiceamerica.org/womens-voices/womens-stories to learn more.

The National Network of Abortion Funds works to make sure that all women and girls can get the abortions they seek. We fight unfair laws while directly helping women who need abortions today. Visit fundabortionnow.org/story/you to learn more.

NotAlone is here to let women who have had abortions know that they are part of a community. We are not ashamed of our experiences; we are not anonymous; and we are not alone. Visit notalone.us to learn more.

Project Voice hopes to establish a resource of sharing and support. Women of all ages, races, religions, backgrounds, and circumstances have had abortions. Visit projectvoice.org to learn more.

Acknowledgements to Contributors

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About Renee Bracey Sherman

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. 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. Renee is a writer with Forward Together's Echoing Ida, a Black women's writing collective named after Ida B. Wells and focused on highlighting racial and health disparities in the Black community. She writes about abortion, reproductive health, rights, and justice, domestic public policy, allyship, and the disparities facing women of color. Renee has been featured on BBC Radio World Newshour, EBONY, Fusion, Salon, RH Reality Check, and Feministing.com. 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 Bachelor of Arts degree in economics and sociology from Northeastern Illinois University and 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 Sea Change Program

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, and support the integration of abortion and other reproductive health services into mainstream health care. Learn more about The Sea Change Program at seachangeprogram.org.

