

How #ShoutYourAbortion Contributes to Community Harm Reduction

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As one of the primary issues driving the U.S. Culture Wars beginning in the 1980s -- a movement which was, in large part, [rooted in a reaction to the changing cultural values kicked off during the 1960s](#) -- abortion has taken up residence in our cultural hearts and minds as a topic worthy of continued public deliberation. Anti-abortion advocates often focus on the sanctity of human life, a position that forces their pro-choice counterparts into characterizing abortion as a necessary evil -- an action that should not be normalized but should be safe, legal, and, hopefully, rare. This approach reframes the question of abortion and the experiences women have in relation to it in a moral and ethical context, resulting in the reality that, even amongst pro-choice advocates, personal discussions of abortion are uncommon and often rooted in feelings of shame. The intention of the #ShoutYourAbortion movement is to shine a light on the lived experience of women in order to demystify the process of abortion, classify it as a medical procedure, reduce the mental and



"Abortion is Normal." Source: Shout Your Abortion Instagram

emotional anguish that often results in self-destructive behavior, and ultimately promote the need for safe, affordable, and accessible abortion care. While critics of the movement counter that its founders focus only on the stories of women who don't regret their choice, therefore erasing the experiences of the women who do, these detractors don't fully explore the origins of those feelings of regret, and whether or not they're rooted in the very shame that #ShoutYourAbortion seeks to abolish. Moreover, by changing the narrative and building a supportive community

around women that encourages them to be open and honest about their experiences with abortion, it is likely that #ShoutYourAbortion can result in an overall decrease in harm within the community.

In response to the 2015 controversy surrounding [heavily edited undercover videos claiming that Planned Parenthood was profiting from abortions](#), the US Congress began discussing whether or not there should be government funding for Planned Parenthood, with some legislators pushing for a complete defunding. For women who had relied on Planned Parenthood for their healthcare, the idea that it would no longer be operational was emotional



Shout Your Abortion co-founder Amelia Bonow. Source: Ian Allen

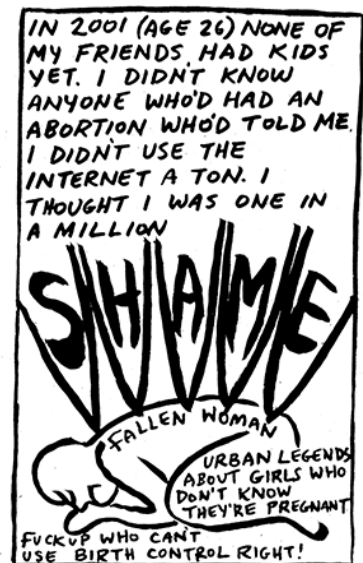
and stressful; one such woman, [Amelia Bonow](#), responded to the situation by posting on social media a positive account of the abortion she had had at a nearby Planned Parenthood clinic the previous year. She shared this post with her friend, writer Lindy West, who subsequently appended a screenshot of the post with the hashtag #ShoutYourAbortion and shared it with her nearly 60,000 followers. This began a movement, and the hashtag was used hundreds of thousands of times by women who felt that they shouldn't -- or couldn't -- talk about their abortion

experiences, helping to establish a community. The goal of the hashtag and, ultimately, [the nonprofit organization](#) founded shortly after, is to reframe the narrative around abortion and remove the shame that often results in women keeping their abortion experiences wrapped in secrecy.

The first way in which it does this is to demystify the process of abortion through sharing unedited stories submitted by women who either take credit or share them anonymously, depending on their circumstances. It seems that there is [a unique abortion story for every woman who has had an abortion](#), and by sharing them, the process surrounding abortion becomes clearer. Reading through these stories shows that, short of abstinence, there isn't a single, perfect way to avoid pregnancy. Women who choose to have abortions are often characterized as women who make poor choices, so a lack of access to other women's stories means that this belief continues to prevail amongst both women who have had abortions and the community around them who have not. Another aspect of open and honest conversations about abortions is that it changes the experience for those that are faced with this decision in the future. It isn't as scary, they know what to expect, and by learning from others, [they can feel more confident in their decision-making process](#).

This has the potential to reduce feelings of shame overall, and possibly mitigate any future regrets, both of which can contribute to a decrease in harm in the community by supporting the mental and emotional health of its members. Indeed, many of the laws and regulations established around abortion [are categorized as "informed consent,"](#) which, on its face, claims to be centered on empowering women but the result of which is often the origin of feelings of shame.

Another way that #ShoutYourAbortion contributes to a decrease in harm in the community is by its focus on normalizing abortion as a medical procedure. By framing abortion as a moral or ethical dilemma, anti-abortion activists change the narrative from one wherein



"SHAME" Comic Panel. Source: Tatiana Gill.

women are making a medical choice to one wherein they're making a choice specifically reflecting their lifestyle. With the latter comes judgment, and the #ShoutYourAbortion movement wants to take back that narrative. As co-founder of the movement, [Lindy West](#), [writes](#), "There are no 'good' abortions and 'bad' abortions, because an abortion is just a medical procedure, reproductive healthcare is healthcare, and it is a fact without caveat that a foetus is not a person. I own my body, and I decide what I allow to grow in it." Taking this stance removes the stigma from abortion, likening it to any medical procedure that we may experience -- no one judges the person undergoing an appendectomy, they just assume that the procedure was medically necessary. #ShoutYourAbortion wants to bring this same level of consideration to abortion, primarily to change the narrative that has been largely set by those in opposition to the procedure. Again, this change in perspective can result in a decrease in emotional strain, ultimately reducing the adverse impact on the community overall.



Shout Your Abortion "Celebratory Postcard." Source: Tatiana Gill

One of the primary adverse impacts that a culture of shame around abortion can have on the community is the self-destructive behavior that some women engage in as a method of managing the emotions surrounding their abortion. [Tatiana Gill](#), for whom the movement was lifechanging, recalls, "I had an abortion in 2001 that I felt extreme

shame over, even 15 years later . . . In 2015 the SYA movement started people talking about their abortions all over social media, without shame or secrets, and [it inspired me to do the same](#).

A few months later, at my first SYA rally, a huge weight of 15 years was lifted off me and I cried at the release. I had really gotten the impression from society that I needed to be very ashamed of myself for having an abortion, doubly for having one at 16 weeks, but of course that isn't true.” What Tatiana details in her comics and art is the self-destructive behavior that she engaged in that was motivated, in part, by the shame she felt from having an abortion. She spent the next eight years struggling with substance abuse and, even after getting sober, the specter of her abortion experience hung over her. It wasn't until the #ShoutYourAbortion movement that she found a community of women that enabled her to voice her experiences and find community. Tatiana [wasn't alone in how she internalized her feelings surrounding her abortion](#), nor how she coped with it. But that kind of self-destructive behavior unnecessarily harms both the person experiencing it and the community that surrounds them. Had there been a more openly supportive movement, wherein women could speak frankly about their experiences, perhaps years of self-destructive behavior could have been avoided.

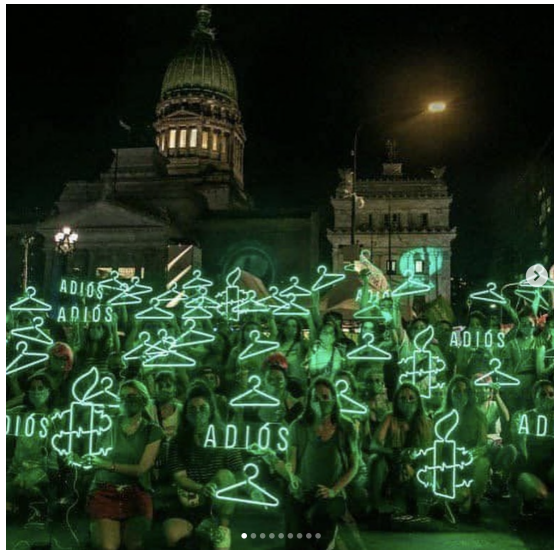
All of this work serves to accomplish #ShoutYourAbortion's founding goal: Promoting the need for safe, affordable, and accessible abortion care. Through the community and platform that #ShoutYourAbortion has created, people around the world are learning how complicated these



Shout Your Abortion enamel pins. Source: Tatiana Gill

experiences are -- a reality that shouldn't be compounded by unsafe medical conditions. In his [paper exploring the impact of #ShoutYourAbortion on public health movements](#), Wasim Ahmed

writes that “[i]f lack of access to safe medical procedures leads to unsafe abortions, then it is important for public health organisations to raise awareness for the importance of safe access to the abortion procedure.” While he considers the success of #ShoutYourAbortion to be relatively limited when it comes to promoting public health information, he does recognize that removing



Argentinian abortion rights protest. Source: Shout Your Abortion Instagram

stigma can have a positive impact on the legal options available to women around the world. The #ShoutYourAbortion movement was inspired by a perceived threat to safe and legal access to abortion care, and their work continues to the present day, in large part, to push the conversation forward around improving access to abortion care -- not only in the United States -- where the movement began -- but everywhere.

Outside of the standard opposition that pro-choice movements experience, #ShoutYourAbortion specifically was cited by critics as attempting to erase the stories of those who had abortions and [didn't necessarily want to "shout" them](#). Their perspective that they are being left out of this movement is somewhat inaccurate, given the diversity of experiences shared on #ShoutYourAbortion's website -- [some women honestly share their complicated emotions about their abortion, recognizing that it is not an easy decision to make](#). And while there are always going to be outliers in any statistic round-up of human experience, [a recent study indicates that](#), by and large, women don't come to regret their decision to have an abortion. Even more interesting, however, is the exploration of the feeling of regret, and how it might be considered from a one-dimensional perspective on both sides of the debate. [Jody L. Madeira](#)

[contends we are conflating too much meaning with the feeling of regret](#), and that we should consider choices surrounding abortion from a more cultural perspective. It's true that when you read story after story of abortion experiences, the decision to abort almost always is framed by external factors that are largely out of our control and are largely financial in nature. Yes, some people cite that they have never wanted children or wanted to achieve other goals in life before having children, but many realize that they don't have the financial nor community support necessary to properly rear the child, and they make this decision with this reality in mind. If the circumstances were changed -- the lack of stigma, financial support, community resources -- many of these women likely would not make the same decision and may have come to regret their abortions because of these extenuating factors, not simply because of the act of the abortion itself.

Ultimately, normalizing the process of abortion creates an atmosphere of support, and this has the potential to decrease stigmas, shame, regret, and unnecessary self-destructive behavior. In areas where access to abortion is scarce or illegal, there is the real threat of death as women engage in [unsafe practices in order to terminate their pregnancies](#). As such, opening up the conversation about abortion to include all experiences enables those who have had them to access a needed community of emotional support. Working to further access to safe, medically-sound procedures results in a reduction in harm in the community overall.

Through their work with #ShoutYourAbortion, West and Bonow have shown a light on the very real needs of women who are struggling with the decision to have



Founders Lindy West and Amelia Bonow. Source: LA Times

an abortion, as well as those who are living with that decision. For some, it's more detrimental than others; for others, more traumatic; but each of their lived experiences serves as the undercurrent of a global community -- and one that would not exist without the power of social media or the #ShoutYourAbortion hashtag.