

COMING TOGETHER TO RESIST STIGMA AND CHANGE CULTURE

By Roula AbiSamra

The Sea Change Program seeks to create a world that upholds the dignity and humanity of people as they move through their reproductive lives. Our work is dedicated to dismantling the culture of stigma associated with abortion and other reproductive experiences. We focus on making the full range of reproductive experiences visible and partnering with organizations, researchers, and communities to develop and share effective practices for reducing reproductive stigmas.

Stigma is a vehicle of social disapproval and reflects a shared belief that certain experiences or identities are morally wrong or unacceptable. People who deploy stigma project this form of punishing shunning onto a person or a group associated with a disapproved activity or identity. For example, many people in the U.S. disapprove of abortion and stigmatize individuals who terminate pregnancies.

We see evidence of this all around us, on anti-abortion billboards in our neighborhoods, especially in predominately Black neighborhoods,¹ via the misrepresentation of abortion on television shows,² and simply in the fact that many people *think* they don't know anyone (or anyone else) who's had an abortion.³

Sea Change works to replace the prevailing narrative about abortion, shifting from one that insists on silence and stigma to one that defines abortion as a normal part of reproductive life, an experience that a third of U.S. women will have in their lifetime.⁴ And while it often seems as if abortion is singled out for stigma, in fact, many other reproductive experiences are also stigmatized.

Even today, many who violate the old norm, "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage," are still vulnerable to judgments and rejection. That's why at Sea Change, we feel abortion stigma is best understood in the context of a spectrum of reproductive experiences, and not singular or unique. We will never succeed at normalizing abortion by setting it apart from the rest of reproductive life.

We focus on culture change because abortion, and reproduction in general, is a medical or politi-

cal issue and also a social and emotional experience embedded in a cultural context. We think of culture change as an essential element of our movement's efforts around healthcare and policy.

For our efforts toward rights, health, and justice to be fruitful - to advance the efforts of advocates, activists, clinicians, and community members - we must also address the culture in which we work. But *how* do you create culture change?

Sea Change has defined its first major area of work as our community engagement program. We've been designing, implementing, and evaluating the Untold Stories Project as a way for people to build a repository of stories about diverse reproductive experiences.⁵ Born from one of our research projects, which found that storytelling

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begets more storytelling and provokes changes of heart, the Untold Stories Project distills this discovery into a shareable tool, a book club, where people can tell stories that aim to reduce interpersonal and community-level stigma.

Sea Change's anthology, *Untold Stories: Life, Love, and Reproduction*, introduces readers to the real-life stories of seventeen very different people living across the United States. In the project's first six months (November 2014 to May 2015), sixty-five groups (of friends, coworkers, and classmates) have signed up to read and discuss *Untold Stories*.

From those who have already held a book discussion, we learned that 48% of participants shared



their own reproductive stories with the group – often for the first time – and 99% of them felt supported when they did.⁶ Group organizers say that personal sharing created new feelings of connection and closeness within their group.

Most participants say the book influenced their perceptions of various reproductive events and people who experience them, using phrases like “eye-opening,” “more empathy,” “broader understanding,” and “everyone’s story is different.”⁷ The book and discussion materials give participants a simple, approachable opportunity to start conversations that enrich them intellectually, strengthen relationships, and give and receive support for experiences that are often stigmatized.

We also work to help the reproductive health, rights, and justice fields create and evaluate their own culture change programs. Through our Capacity Building for Culture Change program, we help organizations develop their own skills and tools for identifying, analyzing, measuring, and transforming stigma in the culture around them. Many of our partnerships are with service delivery organizations, especially abortion providers seeking to understand the stigma that may affect their patients or staff and explore strategies for change.

Currently, we’re learning from organizations working toward a world where young parents are supported, not stigmatized.⁸ These organizations are already shifting stigma at many levels: by providing safe spaces for young parents to gather and share their stories, engaging adults and community members in conversations about sexuality, involving young parents in leadership, driving policy change, and creating positive media messages.⁹ Our capacity building program will provide tailored evaluation expertise to increase the impact of this work for young parents.

Our work continues to show us that reproductive stigma can affect people with many backgrounds and personal histories. Anyone can experience stigma, although its impacts depend on what kind of “mistake” a person has made, and whether she can conceal the so-called mistake and its consequences. The impact may depend most on how vulnerable or how privileged the targeted person is.

But regardless of where and how it occurs,

stigma’s negative effects are a problem for all of us. Stigma contributes to stereotyping and misperceptions that justify unjust policies and the status quo. It prevents people from supporting one another across different experiences, cancelling possibilities that are vital for resistance and change-making.

Stigma is pervasive and takes many forms, harming individuals, justifying structural inequalities and perpetuating discrimination and violence. That’s why culture change is essential to building a more free world. If we learn to see stigma for what it is, we can resist it. If we all work together, we can turn the tide. We want a world where, regardless of their reproductive experiences, all people can be visible, live their truths openly, feel included and integrated in their communities, benefit from supportive connections, and empower each other and themselves to live freely.

NOTES

1. Miriam Zoila Pérez, “New Anti-Abortion Billboards Give Reproductive Justice Activists Déjà Vu,” *Colorlines* (6/17/2015), last accessed 12/2015 at <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/new-anti-abortion-billboards-give-reproductive-justice-activists-d%C3%A9j%C3%A0-vu>.

2. Sarah Mirk, “How TV Distorts the Common Experience of Having an Abortion,” *Alternet* (12/12/2015), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://www.alternet.org/sex-amp-relationships/how-tv-totally-distorts-common-experience-having-abortion>.

3. Tara Culp-Ressler, “Abortion Opponents Underestimate the Number of Women They Know Who Had One,” *ThinkProgress* (11/5/2014), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2014/11/05/3589455/abortion-perception-study/>.

4. Guttmacher Institute, “Induced Abortion in the United States,” (7/2014), last accessed 12/2015 at https://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html.

5. Roula AbiSamra, Steph Herold, Kate Cockrill, “More Connected to Each Other,” *The Sea Change Program* (9/2015), last accessed 12/2015 at http://seachange-program.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Untold-Stories-Report-v2.1_FINAL_8.31_3pm.pdf.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Elizabeth Greenblatt, Kate Cockrill, Steph Herold, “From Severe Stigma to Powerful Resilience,” *The Sea Change Program* (10/2015), last accessed 12/2015 at <https://d3ec4r8avdefua.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Young-Parents-Report.pdf>.

9. *Ibid.*

