

CHOICELESS 201—Amelia Bonow: What Kind of Person Shouts About Abortion?

Amelia Bonow: The right has been able to, largely because they've been entirely uncontested, they've just laid claim to the moral high ground. We haven't put up a fight, you know? We've let them beat us to shit in a culture war, and that has to stop. It shouldn't be that hard. Let's just talk about it. Let's just talk about abortion. Let's talk about what it actually means in people's lives, what it actually feels like, and I think that that's the only place to start.

Jenn Stanley: For Rewire Radio, I'm Jenn Stanley, and this is season two of CHOICE/LESS. I'm so happy to be back, and I'm so happy you're listening. I've been working on this season for the past few months, and during that time the United States elected a president who ran on a white supremacist, misogynist platform. President-elect Donald Trump has also vowed to elect Supreme Court justices who would favor overturning Roe v. Wade. As we step out of the holiday season and into the new year, a lot of families are struggling with how to move forward. I'm sure a lot of our listeners and others had a tough time during this holiday season. These are hard and sometimes impossible conversations to have. I don't know what the answer is.

I report on reproductive justice for a living and I still feel uncomfortable sometimes, especially around my family, worried that something I say is going to offend, like this isn't polite conversation to have. It doesn't matter if this is polite conversation or not. These conversations need to be had. Anti-choice politicians and lobbyists depend on the silence of the people they continue to legislate against, and they do that by creating so much shame and stigma that it's incredibly difficult for many of the one in three women who've had abortions to talk about it. I'm not saying that everyone who's had an abortion needs to publicly share their experience, but we do need to create and keep spaces so that people who want to talk about it, can. That's why I couldn't think of a better way to start off this season than with a conversation with Amelia Bonow, founding director of Shout Your Abortion.

Amelia Bonow: I want to not say what Shout Your Abortion is to start, so just scratch that.

Jenn Stanley: Oh yeah, you don't have to. Yeah, just jump in.

Amelia Bonow: It makes more sense if I say it as a just natural byproduct of the story.

Jenn Stanley: Yeah. Amelia had an abortion a few years ago when she was 29, and she was unapologetic about it from the start.

Amelia Bonow: When I found out that I was pregnant I sent an email to like 20 something people that was a BCC list of my closest friends and family. It just was like, "Hey guys, I'm pregnant. I'm going to have an abortion. I don't foresee this being something that's going to be particularly upsetting, or psychologically damaging, or scary for me but I just wanted to let everyone know so that I don't really, like, feel like I have to have this conversation with each one of you individually, and, um, feel free to check in with me in a couple weeks." I mean, that's clearly not the email that someone would write who feels that they should be stigmatized or shamed for having an abortion, or who has the kind of family, and friends, and community that they fear are going to judge them. On the contrary, I knew that I was going to be supported pretty much across the board, and I was.

Jenn Stanley: She was open with people in her life about her abortion, but she wasn't public about it. She didn't share it with strangers, post about it on social media, or write about it.

Amelia Bonow: I was tending bar at the time, and I would always be on the periphery or participating in conversations about what was going on legislatively with women's bodies without invoking my own personal experience. I was constantly having these conversations with women in my life, and then realizing that we had both had abortions, and that we'd somehow never spoken about that in the course of a really long friendship, and that that silence even in the context of a friendship is maybe representative of some kind of internalized shame, and if that's the case, even with people like us, then we're really giving a lot of power away to the other side. In September of 2015, I was in graduate school working towards a master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, and this was the fall after the Planned Parenthood ... The videos attacking Planned Parenthood had come out in the summer of 2015.

Jenn Stanley: Here's the deal with the Planned Parenthood videos. In the summer of 2015, the Center for Medical Progress, an anti-choice front group headed by David Daleiden, began releasing a series of deceptively edited and now widely discredited videos purportedly depicting Planned Parenthood employees engaging in the illegal sale of human fetal tissue. The effects were immediately devastating for abortion rights. Before anyone had time to investigate the video's legitimacy, several states began investigating their local Planned Parenthood affiliates for illegal activity. By the fall of 2015, the Center for Medical Progress had released 10 videos, and more policy changes to defund Planned Parenthood and limit abortion access were in the works. Even those state-sponsored investigations were turning up no wrongdoing on the part of Planned Parenthood. That's where Shout Your Abortion comes in.

Amelia Bonow: The day that the House of Representatives voted to defund Planned Parenthood I was supposed to be writing a paper for grad school, and I just kind of lost it. I cried and I just sort of flipped out all day feeling just so helpless and so angry. The next day I woke up and I just off the cuff wrote a status update on my personal Facebook page that just said, "Hey everyone, I, I had an abortion a couple of years ago, and the reason I'm telling you this is because it's becoming clear to me that the people who are fighting to take this right away from us are banking on silence from pro-choice individuals like myself, and the reality of my experience was not negative. In fact, it was incredibly positive, and it was something that just left me with this profound feeling of gratitude."

Jenn Stanley: Amelia took a screenshot of the post and sent it to her friend, Lindy West, a well-known feminist writer with a large social media following. Lindy tweeted the photo with the hashtag "shoutyourabortion."

Amelia Bonow: The hashtag just pretty much immediately started going viral and people all over the world started using the hashtag to share their own abortion experiences, often for the first time. It was just so clear in that moment that there was this just profound need for this sort of conduit to exist, and for people to have this outlet that they just hadn't had before, and people were just ready to talk about it. There's no way to be prepared for being at the center of a viral internet explosion. It's pretty intense, and bizarre, and absurd to experience, but the whole thing just immediately sort of ... It just made so much sense, you know?

The fact that the anti-choice movement has been controlling this conversation, really without much challenge from the left, I think has been something that's incredibly frustrating to women who have had abortion experiences that have been positive or that they've been grateful to have had access to. I think that the anti-choice movement isn't legislating this issue in a way that's based in reality, and they've made it so difficult, and fraught, and risky to participate in the conversation from a first-person perspective that people have just really stayed out of it, you know?

When they've so thoroughly dehumanized people who choose to have abortions, people who work in abortion care, you really have to put a lot on the line in order to say, "Yeah, I had an abortion, and I'm not ashamed, and here's what that experience was like." So many people had just suppressed their own experiences out of fear, or out of shame, or just not having the energy to invite another potentially aggressive, damaging, hurtful, judgmental thing into your life, so I think that people were just ready to get free, and people were ready to own their stories in a new way. I wasn't really surprised, because it seemed like just a really obviously necessary step in countering the discourse on the right.

Jenn Stanley: More than 100,000 people tweeted with the hashtag in just a few days. Less than a week after the first tweet, Amelia wrote an essay for Salon titled My Abortion Made Me Happy: The Story that Started the #shoutyourabortion Movement. It opens like this, "I'm not going to explain the circumstances surrounding how and why I got pregnant, although the situation was strange. Often women buffer the disclosure of their abortion with details that are meant to act as a justification for the procedure. Sometimes when a woman gives you the backstory she is saying, 'Please continue to respect me, even though I had the abortion I'm about to tell you about, because it was not the bad kind of abortion, and I am not the bad kind of woman.'" The hashtag was being used all over the world, but in Seattle, where Amelia's from, it came alive. It was more than a hashtag.

Amelia Bonow: People in Seattle were making ... We were having events, and button making parties, and people were having rock and roll shows, and there were just all of these really sort of jubilant celebrations around, as the hashtag was blowing up, around this idea that we as a community can define the way that we talk about this issue, and we can make our community a place that welcomes authentic conversation and discourse about abortion, and creates places for people to talk about their own experiences on their own terms. That just started happening really organically.

Then I left school and started just sort of learning more about the reproductive justice, reproductive rights movement at large, and talking to people about how to sort of harness this energy and build a sustainable organization. Then I received a large grant from an anonymous funder, and was able to get fiscal sponsorship and become a 501(c)(3). Now, a little over a year later, Shout Your Abortion is an organization that's dedicated to creating space in culture for people to talk about their abortion experiences on their own terms. A lot of that happens online and on social media, and a lot of it happens in real life.

When all of this started I was like one-quarter of course work and like a one-year internship away from a master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, and I was going to be a therapist. In many ways, I think that the reasons why I am suited to do the work that I do with SYA are the same reasons why I was drawn to working in mental health, but I think that the work that I can do with SYA just can have a much broader effect and reach a lot more people than I could if I was a counselor running a private practice or whatever. It really wasn't a decision. I don't even think that I filled out drop papers for like a month afterwards.

It wasn't ever a question whether or not the energy behind Shout Your Abortion could be harnessed to become something larger than a hashtag. It was just a question of whether or not someone was going to take it on, and it was just so clear immediately that so many people were getting free of this thing that had held them down for so long, and were so grateful that it existed, and on a national media just cultural discourse level it was really easy to see that it was creating a space that hadn't existed before, and so yeah. Hell yeah I was never going to go back to grad school. I hated that shit anyway.

Jenn Stanley: Last September, Shout Your Abortion threw a Stomp the Patriarchy Ball in Seattle to celebrate its one year anniversary. Shortly after, they launched their website, shoutyourabortion.com, where you can hear and share stories, buy merchandise, and download protest materials. Though Shout Your Abortion is now much more than just a hashtag, the hashtag does live on. You can search for it yourself on Twitter, and on any given day there might be a lot of new people sharing their abortion stories, or sharing information about how to combat anti-choice policies. It's certainly not immune to the trolls who use the hashtag to shame those speaking out. Internet trolls are always going to try to steal our narratives, steal the hashtags, and shame vulnerable people until they no longer feel comfortable sharing.

While people like Amelia have certainly helped create more space for people to come out of the shadows and tell their stories if they want to, I'm not sure we can say that things are safer now, and that's important, because Donald Trump spent his campaign tweeting out inflammatory messages and lies, and he hasn't slowed down since he was elected. While it's more important than ever to get these stories out there to try to combat anti-choice lies, it could also be really risky to share.

Amelia Bonow: God, I'll totally cry if I talk about this, but there have been so many instances in which I have been astounded by people's courage and people's willingness to sacrifice their own sense of security or some piece of their support system in order to publicly live out their personal truth and embody their own sort of politics and morals in the course of the last year has been incredible to witness. It's been really inspiring. It's already so hard to be a woman and walk around the world knowing that people are going to fuck with you. It's not fair. You're going to get treated a certain way in most jobs, in most neighborhoods, but people have just chosen to say, "Fuck it," and just blaze out with these stories.

At the end of the day, I'm pretty cynical when it comes to believing in the potential of systemic change, but seeing the way that people have moved towards this new way of talking about abortion in spite of having to put a lot on the line and the fact that it's not an easy time to be alive, especially if you're a woman, especially if you're a poor woman, if you're a nonwhite woman, seeing people just ante up in that way has made me feel like maybe we've got a shot still. Maybe.

Jenn Stanley: CHOICE/LESS is produced by me, Jenn Stanley, for Rewire Radio, with editorial oversight by Marc Faletti, our Director of Multimedia. Jodi Jacobson is our Editor in Chief. Brady Swenson is our Director of Technology. Music for this episode was by Doug Helsel. Thank you to all the staff at Rewire, especially Rachel Perrone, Lauryn Gutierrez, and Stacey Burns, our communications and social media team. Shout Your Abortion recently launched their new beautiful website, and I encourage you all to check that out at shoutyourabortion.com. For more on this story and comprehensive news, commentary, and analysis on reproductive and sexual health and justice, visit our website at rewire.news/choiceless. Thanks for listening.