



More connected to each other

*Results and insights from
launching the Untold Stories
Project, a new campaign of
reproductive storytelling*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many of our deepest moments of connection come from the act of listening to someone else's story. For the person who is telling it, that same moment can dissolve the pain and isolation of carrying a story alone. Through our book, *Untold Stories: Life, Love and Reproduction*, the Sea Change Program introduces readers to stories not often told or heard. Through our outreach, we engaged people around the country in conversations that use the book as a platform for learning, sharing, and connecting.

We designed the Untold Stories Project after the well-known model of a book club, in which a group of friends agree to read the same book then gather to discuss it. Our pilot research showed us that reading a book of personal reproductive stories helped book club members tell each other about their own such experiences and had a lasting impact on their judgments about reproduction. To learn if these benefits could be achieved on a greater scale, we created a book of new stories, shared it with dozens of reading groups across the United States, and gathered data about what happened next.

In the project's launch year, our primary objectives were to engage new writers in public storytelling about reproduction and to recruit 25-50 reading groups to hold discussions about *Untold Stories*. As an organization committed to innovation, learning, and checking our assumptions, the Sea Change Program also conducted an evaluation of the project's process, outcomes, and insights: how we progressed toward our objectives, the impact of storytelling on participants' awareness and empathy, and what makes a project like this effective and meaningful. We share the major findings in this report.

We successfully engaged 17 writers in a rewarding experience of reproductive storytelling. Authors are proud of their involvement, willing to promote the project in various ways, and especially moved by opportunities to connect with each other. All say that the collaboration with Sea Change was positive, and most say it helped them share their story with new audiences or new people in their lives. Almost all report a continuing or increased interest in work to shift reproductive stigma. Authors' main challenge in participating was their worry about negative judgment upon making their story public. We continue to improve

our work with storytellers, whose concerns are central to our programming.

Through our outreach activities, we recruited 65 reading groups in 25 U.S. states and D.C. Our evaluation survey respondents (212 so far) are overwhelmingly "very satisfied" (81%) or "somewhat satisfied" (18%) with their experience with the project. A large majority (88%) say they would recommend the book to a friend or another reading group. Hosts who organized a reading group say they would recommend the project to others, and our materials and process were helpful and engaging. The only challenge they cited was in finding a convenient meeting date for their group.

Reading group participants report high rates of positive feeling toward the book's authors, as well as increased knowledge about and empathy for others' reproductive experiences. In their responses, they used phrases like "eye-opening," "more empathy," and "more open to the nuance of reproductive decisions." Half of them (48%) shared a personal reproductive story of their own during their group's discussion, and 99% of those who shared felt supported by their group when they did so. Our interviews with reading group hosts suggest that this spontaneous story-sharing usually occurred during discussion of a related story in the book or in response to another person's sharing. Hosts emphasized that establishing comfort and trust was critical in allowing personal disclosures and discussion of stigmatizing attitudes to surface.

Lessons from the past year will help us shape the project's future. We have seen that there is broad interest in tools for sparking discussion about reproductive experiences, and that a book club format is an effective, user-friendly model for doing so. The Untold Stories Project offers a powerful tool for transformative conversations, one that happens to also be approachable and enjoyable. We are next focusing our outreach in the Southern United States, a region where the diversity of people's reproductive experiences has often gone unrecognized, and where opportunities for nuanced private conversation may be an appealing alternative to familiar public discourses of political division. By investing in relationships with and among partners and participants, we can put better tools into more hands and offer participants a sense of fellowship as co-creators of a regional sea change.

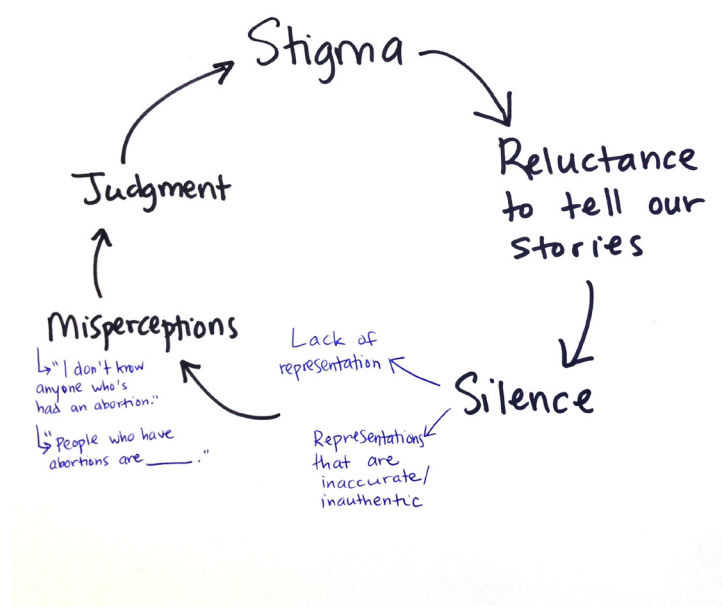
BACKGROUND

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

— Maya Angelou

The Untold Stories Project creates opportunities for deep human connection in conversations about the great complexity of reproductive experiences, especially ones that are stigmatized. Stigma can affect anyone whose personal story diverges from social ideals of gender, sexuality, and family-making, such as experiences of abortion, postpartum depression, LGBT parenting, or transnational adoption. Though these reproductive experiences are diverse, each can be accompanied by shame, judgment, and disconnection, which all deter people from speaking about their experiences and further hide their stories from view. The Untold Stories Project disrupts the silence and isolation of stigma by bringing people together in discussions about reproduction that spark openness, curiosity and connection.

The project is inspired by our prior research, particularly a 2012 study that asked: Does telling one’s story affect how the listener feels about people with similar stories? And are people willing to share their own stories in private spaces?



Stigma is both a cause and an outcome of the silencing of certain stories, including stories of abortion and many other reproductive experiences.

In that study, we recruited 14 book clubs across the United States to read a book of 23 personal stories about reproduction and discuss it at a book club meeting. The book prompted open and curious conversations among women and men in the groups, many of whom shared reproductive stories of their own as well. For example, half of those who had had miscarriages and four-fifths of those who had had abortions discussed their experiences with their group, often for the first time. We also saw a lasting positive change in individuals’ attitudes about commonly stigmatized reproductive experiences, particularly among those who started with the most anti-abortion attitudes. Energized by what we discovered, we launched the Untold Stories Project, aiming to spotlight often-silenced reproductive experiences through new public storytelling and new opportunities for private sharing and connecting.

Project objectives and methods

We had two primary objectives in the project’s launch year. First, we aimed to engage new writers in reproductive storytelling and project promotion. From January to March 2014, the Sea Change Program publicized a call for original stories for a new anthology. In April, staff and board volunteers selected 17 stories that introduced us to new experiences, provoked discussion, and compelled us to investigate our own attitudes and beliefs. We worked with the stories’ authors to orient them to the project’s goals, to connect them to one another, and to support them throughout their engagement. In October 2014, we published *Untold Stories: Life, Love, and Reproduction* through CreateSpace (an Amazon company). The *Untold Stories* authors differ in age, race, religion, gender, sexuality,



and reproductive experience, but each has a unique voice and an important story to tell. Brought together, their work challenges stereotypes, promotes respect, and offers a new narrative of reproductive complexity.

Anyone can be a reader of *Untold Stories*, but we believe this book is best explored in small group discussions. Our second objective was to recruit between 25 and 50 groups to discuss the book. Groups could be book clubs, families, workplace groups, or any other configuration of individuals. To support groups in having a positive experience, we created a Discussion Group Guide for hosts. These guides contain information on the project, tips for organizing and facilitating a discussion, and suggested discussion questions. We promoted the project and the book through events, the Sea Change website and newsletter, social media, personal contacts, and colleagues who spread the word in their own organizations. *Untold Stories* authors were invited to take part in these outreach activities as well as media opportunities.

We created a new section of the Sea Change Program website dedicated to the project (also accessible at www.untoldstories.us) that included an automated information request form.



Books and reading group materials for the Untold Stories Project Toolkit

Project staff emailed people who signed up and, through further phone or email communication, asked interested individuals to agree to the participation process, namely:

- To confirm the participation of their existing book club, or to gather a new reading group among their friends, colleagues, classmates, or other community members
- To schedule and hold the discussion.
- To give evaluation surveys to the group and return completed surveys to project staff.
- To have a phone interview with project staff after the discussion.

For every individual who committed to organizing a group to participate in the project (a “host”), we prepared and shipped a free Reading Group Toolkit, including a Discussion Group Guide for the host and enough copies of *Untold Stories* for all group members. The package also contained a copy of our brief evaluation survey for each participant, and a canvas bag and journal with the *Untold Stories* logo. The host was responsible for organizing the reading group’s participation; project staff followed up with hosts by email or phone to document their progress and offer guidance.

To test our assumptions of how culture change works, we designed an evaluation of the project’s process, outcomes and insights. It assessed: how we progressed toward these objectives, the impact of storytelling on connection and empathy among participants, and what is most important in carrying out this work. This report summarizes the methods and main findings of our evaluation. It draws on surveys of authors and reading group participants, interviews with reading group hosts, and our documentation of the implementation process.

Evaluation aims and methods

We designed the Untold Stories Project to intervene at multiple points of the stigma cycle, with the overall goals of increasing public and private storytelling (sharing of personal reproductive experiences); increasing awareness and understanding of stigmatized reproductive experiences; and encouraging support for those with stigmatized reproductive experiences. With these goals in mind, our 2014 project launch aimed to:

- 1) Engage new **writers** in sharing their stories of reproductive stigma publicly, and in participating in and promoting the project;
- 2) Recruit 25-50 **reading groups** to read and discuss *Untold Stories* after its publication.

We carried out a mixed-methods evaluation to measure progress toward these two objectives as well as the resulting impact on our goals for disrupting stigma. We designed a “Process, Outcomes, and Insights” evaluation guided by the following questions: How did we implement the project? What has resulted from it? What have we learned about doing this work?

Evaluating our work with authors

To assess our efforts to engage new writers in reproductive storytelling, Sea Change staff recorded the number of previously unpublished stories submitted to our call for essays, the number of these stories shared publicly through the publication of *Untold Stories*, and the occasions on which the *Untold Stories* contributors (referred to here as the “authors”) participated in project activities. We also emailed an online survey (14 items, mixed-methods, approximately 15 minutes in length), to all *Untold Stories* authors in June 2015. The survey asked authors about the challenges and rewards of participating in the project, their experiences partnering with Sea Change and publishing their story, resulting experiences of story-sharing or reciprocal disclosures from others, impact on their feelings of stigma and support, and their interest in future engagement.

Evaluating our work with reading groups

The project’s central goal was to generate story-sharing and stigma-shifting among acquaintances by recruiting groups to read and discuss *Untold Stories*. Project staff created internal tracking documents for reading group enrollment and participation. In every Toolkit we shipped to a reading group, we included brief evaluation surveys for all participants. We asked hosts to distribute the surveys to discussion participants near the end of the meeting, collect them again before participants left, and mail them to Sea Change in a provided postage-paid envelope. The survey was a two-page questionnaire (12 items, mixed-methods, approximately 10 minutes in length) that asked about participants’ demographic backgrounds and their experiences participating in the project, including whether they had gained new knowledge or new feelings about others’ reproductive experiences and whether they had shared any reproductive experiences of their own during the discussion. We analyzed these data through quantitative calculations or qualitative content analysis.

Finally, we also asked hosts to participate in a one-on-one, semi-structured phone interview with project staff (30-45 minutes in length). The same staff person conducted all interviews by using an interview guide that aimed to elicit hosts’ insights about what encourages personal reproductive story-sharing and attitude transformation; we also asked about benefits and challenges of project participation. We reviewed interview notes and transcripts to conduct a simplified thematic analysis, starting by comparing responses “horizontally” across interviews for our main questions and also including themes that emerged from the data. We planned to discontinue the routine host interviews when they stopped yielding new themes.

KEY RESULTS

Engaged and supported storytellers

“It felt like a weight off my shoulders when the book was published. Having these stories out there in the world to begin important conversations means more to me than words can express.”



Authors’ panel at the *Untold Stories* launch party in Oakland, CA

Our outreach to potential storytellers resulted in 31 submissions to the project, 29 of which had never before been published. Sea Change staff and board volunteers selected 13 of these stories for publication, plus four from the anthology (*Choice*) used in our 2012 pilot of the project.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2014, our team worked with each author to prepare their essays for

publication; authors received \$100 and retained rights over their story's use in other publications. We held two conference calls to introduce the authors to one another and to hear their feelings or concerns about the upcoming publication of the book. We invited all authors to a listserv where we could provide occasional email updates about the project; this platform also allowed the authors to communicate amongst themselves about their hopes for the project and to support each other through any concerns.



Authors participated in media interviews, book events, and online projects like this video.

We published the book in late October 2014 and held a book launch party in Oakland, CA, the following month. Six authors spoke on a panel at this event to discuss the experience of sharing a story; they described simultaneously being excited to inspire others through sharing their experiences and also feeling vulnerable and nervous about their stories being public. We invited all authors to participate in ongoing communications and outreach about the project. Six participated in written interviews for our website; three had their stories reprinted in a feature by a popular website; two participated in interviews with journalists; two authors have participated in book signings; and one narrated her storytelling experiences in a new Sea Change video. Finally, one of the authors is in the process of bringing *Untold Stories* to the stage as an adapted play.

In June 2015, we surveyed the *Untold Stories* authors to learn more about their experiences; 13 out of 17 authors responded. One hundred percent of respondents said that working with Sea Change was a positive experience and 85% felt supported by Sea Change in telling their

story (the other 15% neither agreed nor disagreed). When asked whether they felt more support around their experiences since engaging with the project, 46% agreed or strongly agreed (54% said that the amount of support they felt had not changed).

Most (61%) of the responding authors said that the project had helped them write a story they otherwise wouldn't have shared publicly, and 54% said they had told others about the experiences described in their story more than they did previously:

"Writing about my experience, which I had never shared fully with anyone, freed me to discuss it with friends and family."

Most (61%) also said that sharing their story resulted in hearing about personal reproductive experiences from others in their lives. One author described how the project enabled her to move from silence and isolation to self-expression, connection, and even increasing engagement with the community beyond her personal circle. She wrote:

"Writing my story has given me more confidence to speak openly about my birth mother experience. I have definitely been sharing my story more. And when I spoke at [a local reproductive health center's event], a woman told me her story from the perspective of someone who was adopted. We both cried... If I hadn't written my story with The Sea Change Program, I likely wouldn't have the confidence to stand in front of a room full of people to tell my story, and the woman would have never shared her story with me."

Many authors noted that Sea Change's author engagement activities helped them to gain appreciation for the experiences of others, or to feel a greater sense of belonging:

"I loved meeting the other authors and having the experience of reading these other stories. I was deeply moved by the pieces in this book and it made me feel part of a community."

"It was lovely to experience my story in the broader context of many stories about reproduction. I often feel very different from most women, but seeing my story in this book made me feel like my story is one among many."

Authors also named some challenges associated with participating. While a third reported no challenges, another third cited their worries or “inner fears” around being public about a stigmatized reproductive experience. Three of the authors (25%) remarked that they did not feel fully informed about the project or the intent of the book.

Finally, we asked authors about their interest, compared to a year prior, in: engaging in storytelling work, collaborating with the Sea Change Program, Sea Change’s work in general, and the issue of reproductive stigma in general. Most (75%-83%) said they had become more interested in each of these since joining the Untold Stories Project.

Communities inspired to start a new conversation about reproduction

“Just coming together, and talking about these things you can’t talk about with other people, seemed to make us feel more connected to each other. You could feel the sense of catharsis in the room.”

To engage participants in the project, we implemented ongoing outreach through events and on the Internet from October 2014 to March 2015. Our November 2014 book launch party in Oakland drew over 100 attendees. We sold books at several events, including the launch party, a local film screening, and a national reproductive health conference; sales at these events and on our Amazon page have totaled over 400 books as of June 2015. We regularly mentioned the project on Facebook and Twitter, and in November 2014 we organized a tweetchat with 12 organizational partners using the hashtag #UntoldStories and featuring six authors. We also featured the project in emails to the

Sea Change Program’s supporters, on the homepage of the organization’s website, and on the Untold Stories Project webpage. From November 2014 to March 2015, 112 individuals submitted requests through this webpage for information on joining the project; another 36 expressed interest directly to program staff or by emailing our general information account.

Location of Group	Completed	Not Yet Completed	TOTAL
Midwest	7	8	15
Northeast	13	5	18
South	10	7	17
West	11	4	15
TOTAL	41	24	65

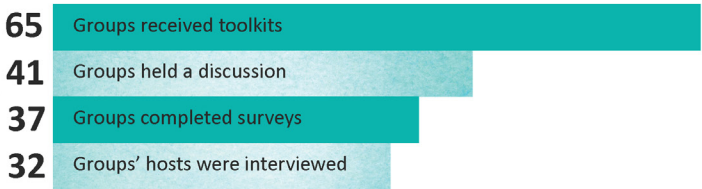
Enrolled reading groups’ completion of project participation by region

“Completed” groups have already held their scheduled discussion about *Untold Stories*. “Not yet completed” groups are those whose host received a project Toolkit but did not confirm that a discussion took place as of June 2015; three of these withdrew their participation. Regions were defined using standard U.S. Census categories.

After being contacted by project staff, 60 of these people committed to organizing a total of 65 reading groups, and we provided them with Toolkits and guidance for doing so. We asked all group hosts to collect post-discussion survey data from all participants, and we conducted post-discussion phone interviews with the hosts until we reached data saturation. As of June 2015, 41 groups completed their discussion; we received 212 surveys from individuals in 37 reading groups, and four other groups completed a discussion but did not return any surveys. No hosts declined to participate in an interview; we conducted interviews with 30 hosts (of 32 groups) before determining that no further themes were emerging.



Reading group outreach results



Reading group participants were mostly women (95%), although a smaller proportion of participants identified as men, genderqueer or agender; only a few specified whether they were transgender or cisgender. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 71 years old; most group members were in their 20s (51%) or 30s (31%). The majority of participants self-identified as white or Caucasian (74%), followed by those who identified as Black or African American (7%), biracial or multiracial (5%), Asian or Pacific Islander (5%), Latina or Hispanic (4%), and other (5%). A large majority of participants said they had completed a bachelor's degree (64%) or an advanced degree (30%).



These 212 reading group participants overwhelmingly were “very satisfied” (81%) or “somewhat satisfied” (18%) with their overall experience participating in the project (average rating of 4.8 on a 1-5 Likert scale). They felt generally positive (74%) toward the authors of the book's stories, with some feeling mixed (25%). A large majority (88%) said they would recommend the book to a friend or another reading group.

Understanding and empathy

The survey included open-ended questions asking participants to describe if the book had influenced their knowledge and feelings about the experiences described in the stories. In their responses, participants shared how reading the stories brought up new emotions as well as new awareness.

Many participants highlighted specific issues they had learned more about, and many others said the stories had expanded their awareness of reproductive diversity in general. Some said the stories taught them that others' experiences are complex and deeply individual. Often, they linked this learning to a sense of increased understanding and empathy:

“I previously had little to no knowledge about infertility, parenting while trans, or being intersex. It opened my eyes to these issues and the people experiencing them, gave me better empathy.”

“The stories helped me explore the personal decisions of others and allow them their humanity, regardless of my own opinions. I feel more open to the nuance of reproductive decisions.”

Some participants specifically noted a new awareness of the interactions between identity, oppression, privilege, and experiences of reproduction:

“The book gave me more insight into the obstacles for reproduction, rather than just abortion, and how those are confounded by issues of race, class, and sexuality.”

Many also came away with insights on some of the negative effects of stigma. For example, some said reading the book made them notice their own judgments; how often reproductive experiences are shamed; or the silence that usually surrounds certain stories:

“It was such a good reminder of how diverse our experiences are, but that there's this underlying commonality that—unfortunately—we're often shamed for our decision.”

"[The stories] helped normalize life experiences, and gave me language to talk about these topics."

Openness and connection

The book groups also prompted personal sharing on the part of the participants. Nearly half (48%) of them told the group about a personal reproductive experience of their own during the book discussion. They most commonly discussed their decisions about having children (40% of all who shared), including the choice to not have children (19% of all who shared); and their experiences with abortion (11%), infertility (11%), pregnancy (10%), miscarriage (8%), and more.

Of those who shared their experiences, 87% reported that some in the group were hearing their story for the first time. And 99% of those who shared their experiences said they felt supported by the responses of their fellow group members.

Hosts we interviewed shared their insights about the dynamics of such sharing. Most commonly, they observed that participants usually talked about their personal experiences in response to another story—either after another participant disclosed a similar experience, or when discussing a relevant passage in *Untold Stories* (and many hosts specifically credited the diversity of stories in the book):

"Because of the range of stories in the book, everyone who read it connected to something [in it]. It was easy for people to open up... People shared things that they experienced that were like the book, or that the book made them think could have been different. Two people told personal stories of having had an

abortion—that's not something you can talk to a lot of people about, so it was pretty cool that we could."

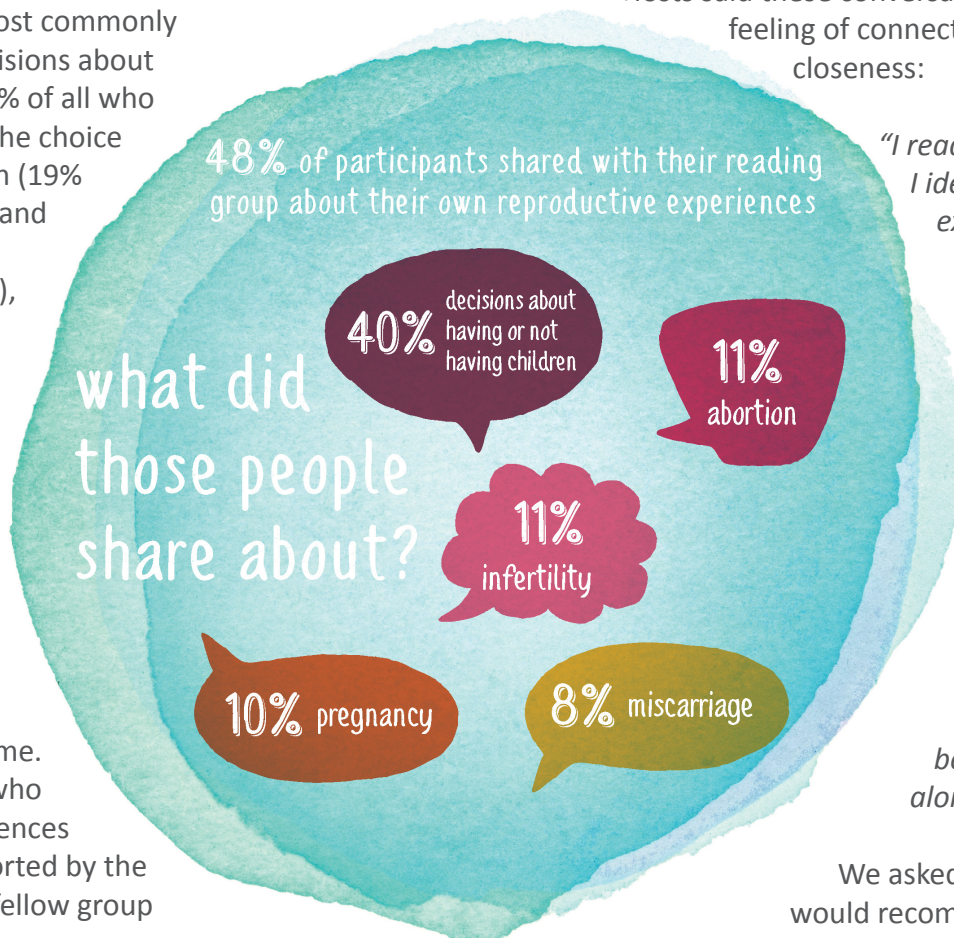
"It takes just one person sharing to get the conversation going. After I shared, other people shared in response."

Hosts said these conversations resulted in a feeling of connection or increased closeness:

"I read some sentences I identified with, and explained how it provoked a lot of unpleasant feelings about my postpartum experiences. And when I did that, one person touched my shoulder and said 'Oh my god, I experienced that exact same thing.' That made me feel better, and not so alone."


We asked hosts what they would recommend to other reading groups to ensure a meaningful and supportive discussion. Many stressed the importance of creating a space that is comfortable and safe, both physically and socially. They favored private spaces (like someone's home) over institutional spaces (like meeting rooms) or public venues (like cafes). They often mentioned food and drink as helping participants feel "at home"; some hosts provided these, while others specifically suggested a potluck-style group contribution.

Most of all, they talked about establishing trust and safety in the conversation: some spoke of agreeing to "ground rules" or announcing a "safe space," while others said their group was so close that this was now an unspoken understanding. Those whose groups were less well acquainted appreciated the Discussion Group Guide's suggestions for creating such an understanding.



Nearly all recommended ensuring, explicitly if necessary, that participants know that all personal disclosures will be treated as confidential and that differences of opinion should be expressed respectfully.

This was important in helping people share not only their personal stories but also opinions they feared were unpopular, especially if the reading group participants were professional colleagues. One host, who held a reading group for her coworkers in their abortion clinic, said that a respectful tone allowed the group to express what they didn't know:



"Just coming together and talking about these things seemed to make us feel more connected to each other."

(reading group host, Texas)

"We come from a variety of educational backgrounds, and we all learned things that we didn't know before, and we were able to share in our learning—and be respectful toward each other for not knowing everything, too."

And another, who met with her personal book group (but who works in reproductive advocacy), said she herself had benefited from the safe environment when sharing her response to some of the book's stories describing difficult abortion experiences:

"I was personally challenged in reading stories of women who had abortions and were suffering trauma related to that. [In my] work, I most often see those stories used by the right-to-life movement in very manipulative ways. So we talked a lot about that—for me to be able to accept that there are people who are not using their stories for manipulative purposes who did have trauma, and their experiences are valid."

Finally, we asked hosts about challenges in participating in the project, and whether they had recommendations for improving the process. Almost all said they had experienced no challenges, except for the difficulty of scheduling a meeting date that all participants could attend. Many said that as a result, their group's discussion took place much later than they expected when enrolling. On the other hand, most cited the materials and support provided by project staff as helpful, and said the process was already made very easy to engage with:

"It's really helpful to know that you can have this conversation—that, as radical an act as it is, you guys have created this nice little kit, you don't have to come up with it all on your own, there's a guide with questions if you get stuck. Just because it's a topic we don't usually openly talk about in that kind of setting, doesn't mean you can't. It's actually simple! All you have to do is show up."

Engaging allies in reproductive health, rights, and justice

We were interested in learning more from those who participated in reading groups within their organizations in the reproductive health, rights, and justice fields. These included workplaces, volunteer or grassroots groups, and student groups; 18 of these groups have held their discussion to date. The student and volunteer groups' experiences were, for the most part, similar to those of reading groups not affiliated with the field. However, a few sub-themes emerged in the surveys and interviews about workplace reading groups, specifically.

Most of these participants and their hosts were surprised—but highly appreciative—about the diversity of experiences represented in the book. Many expressed that they had learned something new despite already being immersed in their field.

Yet, compared to others, fewer of the workplace groups' participants said that the book had influenced their feelings. As well, according to their hosts, discussions among colleagues were less likely to include sharing of personal stories and more likely to compare the book's stories to their work experiences. In particular, staff and managers of abortion clinics tended to feel the stories of abortion experiences were disproportionately "dramatic" or "depressing,"

or otherwise unrepresentative of the majority of their patients. Additionally, some in reproductive health or rights advocacy wondered if community members outside of their field would come away from a book about difficult experiences with *less* acceptance of them rather than more.

Despite their concern, we did not see this kind of effect in the survey responses of participants outside of the reproductive health, rights, and justice field. Additionally, we found this concern mostly arose in the workplace groups; other hosts affiliated with the field (who held a reading group for their employer's community supporters, their grassroots or student organization, or their personal circle) did not comment on this. However, additional data might be needed to understand the impact of conversations about reproductive experiences within the professional reproductive field and outside the field, and we are interested in learning more.

At the same time, most hosts who organized workplace groups were still happy with the overall experience. They spoke to the project's impact in their own workplace, or mentioned their group's desire to share the project with other organizations or their personal circles:

"Of course as coworkers we all already have a relationship, but the book got us talking more—and talking about different things than we usually do. And we've been talking about it ever since."

"Everyone said they were planning to share their book with someone else next. And we all talked about recommending this for other groups and people in our communities."

DISCUSSION

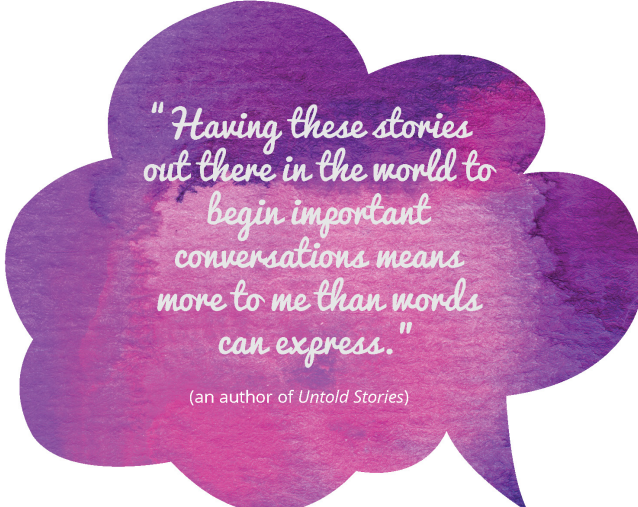
Looking back at the first year of the Untold Stories Project, we see new relationships and inspiring impacts, as well as lessons and emerging questions. These make us look forward to finding out what else this work can accomplish.

Overall, our engagement with authors was a success. Authors were proud of their involvement, willing to promote the project in various ways, and especially touched by various opportunities to engage with each

other. They experienced the collaboration with Sea Change as supportive, and most said it helped them share their story with new audiences or new people in their lives. Almost all reported a continuing and increased interest in engaging with storytelling and other work to shift reproductive stigma. As we continue to work with these authors and other storytellers, we will further improve our work to keep their needs and concerns at the center of our programming. Last year, Sea Change commissioned a [report](#)¹ on the experiences of people who have partnered with organizations to share their abortion stories publicly; the findings helped shape our project's author engagement activities, and our recent survey of the *Untold Stories* authors will supplement this knowledge.

As well, our work to engage reading groups in discussions about *Untold Stories* has been successful, yielding new insights as well as new questions about this work. First, we have seen that there is community interest in tools for sparking private discussion about reproductive experiences, and that the book club format is an approachable, user-friendly model for this purpose. Nearly every host who organized a reading group told us they would recommend the project to others, and most said that the materials, process, and program staff were helpful and easy to engage with. Further, they cited almost no challenges with the project—except for the challenge of organizing a group of individuals around a meeting date.

In fact, scheduling the group discussion was the main barrier to participation in the project. As a result, roughly a third of groups who received a Toolkit have



"Having these stories out there in the world to begin important conversations means more to me than words can express."

(an author of *Untold Stories*)

1 <http://seachangeprogram.org/our-work/untold-stories-project/storytelling-research/>



"Participating in the Untold Stories Project was provocative and inspiring, and it helped cultivate new relationships in my community. That's what I'd tell my mom about it!"

(reading group host, Washington)


not yet met for discussion; and, among the groups who did complete a discussion, another fraction of the expected participants were unable to attend. Indeed, the primary challenge of the project has been in group follow-through—tracking delayed or canceled participation of a reading group that already received project materials—and we are interested in finding ways to mitigate such losses in future.

The results of the group discussions themselves are the most encouraging. Large majorities of participants reported positive feelings toward the book's authors, expanded knowledge and acceptance of others' reproductive experiences, and enthusiasm for recommending *Untold Stories* to others. And discussing the book's stories made space for new stories to emerge: half of participants told their group members about a personal reproductive experience of their own. In fact, although most groups were composed of friends or acquaintances, a large majority of those who shared said that this was a first-time disclosure to at least some of those present.

We found that story-sharing is usually prompted by discussion of a story in the book or by another person's sharing, and it results in feelings of connection or greater closeness. It is quite likely that other stories remained untold, among both those who shared and those who did not. However, nearly all who shared a personal experience said they felt supported by their group's responses, suggesting that the discussion process may also enable participants to decide whether they feel safe in making a disclosure. Further, hosts emphasized

that comfort and trust are important conditions for participants' sharing of their own stigmatized personal experiences as well as for surfacing and transforming their stigmatizing attitudes.

An emerging question is whether the participation experience of people employed in reproductive health, rights, or justice might differ from the norm. Many of these participants were surprised by the diverse content of *Untold Stories*, and glad for the learning it generated about experiences that are less visible in their daily work in the field. Even in the workplace groups, where new personal disclosures were less common and people were less likely to say the book had influenced their feelings, participants still reported it had increased their knowledge. However, they also felt that the book made certain experiences seem too "traumatic," especially abortion. Some noted that most people who have abortions do not experience the exceptional circumstances of some stories in the book. Others feared that, with anti-abortion groups already eager to associate abortion with trauma, the book's stories of difficult abortion experiences might increase, rather than decrease, abortion stigma.



"It created the space to talk about things that we otherwise don't take the time for."

(reading group host, Massachusetts)

Happily, we did not find an increasing-stigma effect in the other groups; this might suggest those who are immersed in the field professionally are less able to predict the responses of people who are not. It might also be a manifestation of internalized stigma, in the form of fear that a difficult individual narrative might tarnish all similar experiences and mischaracterize one's work. We hope to learn more as we engage further with people working in this field.

There are limitations to these results. Our survey sample was smaller than expected due to delayed participation. In addition, the conclusions we can draw are based on a self-selected group of participants who might differ from people who didn't sign up or whom we didn't reach at all. Our outreach efforts began among our professional networks and our social media audiences, who likely already had some interest in our offerings. We are planning to extend our outreach strategy in hopes of reaching new participants who are not yet familiar with the Sea Change Program's work. In the process we are mindful that, even though our model and materials provide a simple tool for sparking new discussion, taking time to support people new to hosting a reading group might have some part in the tool's success.

NEXT STEPS

The Untold Stories Project is dedicated to facilitating transformative connection by bringing together friends and neighbors in a context where they might feel safe to share their stories, hear the stories of others, and discover that they have allies and companions in their midst. Our participants' experiences bear out our hunch that a reading group is much more than the sum of its parts. They told us that the approachable context of a reading group and our book of highly diverse, interesting stories also turned out to be an unexpected, and much welcomed, facilitator for connecting and empathizing with each other.

We hope to bring the successes and lessons from the launch of the Untold Stories Project to our 2015 and 2016 outreach in the U.S. South. Our personal and professional ties to Southern states motivate us to lift up a different narrative of the region: the one in which reproductive diversity is common and support for differing experiences is normative. In outside stereotypes of the region, and even in

Southerners' own perceptions, stigma contributes to the unfortunate—and false—invisibility of people with certain reproductive experiences, and of others who could be their allies. As one Southern author writes in *Untold Stories*, "I've never met [someone else like me], but we've probably bumped carts in the supermarket or sat next to each other at our kids' soccer games. There are millions of us, yet we remain strangers to this day." In truth, stigmatized individuals and potential allies are living as neighbors. Their experiences of invisibility and isolation might be replaced with transformative connection, if such an encounter could be facilitated.

We are continuing to engage with past participants and colleague organizations in the South, and also plan to expand and diversify our outreach in the coming year. Some have already begun sharing the project with others or organizing new reading groups. In addition to community reading groups engaging with the whole spectrum of reproductive experiences, we hope to eventually establish long-term collaborations with organizations in disseminating and evaluating the Untold Stories Project as a tool for reducing community-level stigma against abortion providers and people who have abortions.

At the same time, as we explore how the project can be most useful in Southern communities, participants' voices will point the way. As a reading group host in Atlanta, Georgia, shared, "I asked people to think about their vision or hopes for something different in the world...They really wanted to see the conversation in our country move away from 'yes or no on abortion' – that it's more than just pro/anti, and more than just about abortion."

The conversations this project facilitates will be driven by their own concerns.

They remind us, too, of the importance of established relationships as well as building trust within new ones. New and strengthened relationships will be both a driver of this work and an outcome of it.



"The book got us talking more, and talking about different things than we usually do. And we've been talking about it ever since."

(reading group host, Georgia)

Throughout the process, we will continue collaborating with local and regional organizations already working for reproductive wellness, to ensure the project aligns with existing goals and needs.

In addition, this year the project will incorporate new information and options for participants to go beyond their reading group, to connect with those local organizations and with each other.

We are committed to grounding the project in these relationships so that our work can put useful tools into more hands, foster new connection both within close circles and across them, and offer participants a sense of fellowship as co-creators of a regional sea change.

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About the 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 Sea Change at seachangeprogram.org.