When I was about six or seven years old, I came across a box of tampons in our bathroom cupboard. I knew I had seen it before and had probably looked inside, but until that point, I had just classified the box and its contents as “adult stuff” that wasn’t particularly interesting or noteworthy. But for some reason, on this day, I asked my mother what these things were.

“Tampons,” she replied.

“What are they for?” I asked.

“Women use them when they menstruate.”

“When they what?”

My mother has always been great at explaining things—she is straightforward, almost clinical. I appreciate this. But her explanation on that day shocked me. I was rattled. Women bleed every month? This seemed so improbable to me, but I knew my mother would not lie to me about this. I remember feeling the room spin slightly. How could I not have known? I remember asking my mother
about each and every woman I knew—aunts, teachers, and friends of the family. Did they all menstruate? Yes, she assured me, they all did.

I was so disturbed by the fact that I had not known about this deeply important—even sacred—bodily function and that all the women I knew not only experienced this but hid it, kept it secret, did their best never to discuss it. Questions raced through my mind: How did I not know? Why did they keep this a secret? And most importantly—what else were they keeping secret?

Noticing that women kept their reproductive lives secret stayed with me as I grew older. In my teen years and early twenties, I noticed that this secrecy also applied to sexuality, birth control, abortion, pregnancy, birth, and menopause.

When a close friend of mine became pregnant in her early twenties, she stayed with my mother and I while she had her abortion. It was a difficult time, and once again, I noticed this secrecy creeping up. My friend was feeling very alone and isolated; she did not want her family to know that she was pregnant. At one point, my mother had a friend over for dinner, and the four of us were sitting around the table chatting. In a very nonchalant way, my mom’s friend asked my friend why she was staying with us, and there was an uncomfortable silence. While my mind was racing, trying to figure out a way to “fix” the situation, my friend replied that she was staying with us while she had an abortion. My mother’s friend very quickly responded that she too had had an abortion and shared her story. For me, this experience was the antithesis of that first experience with the secrecy surrounding women’s reproductive lives. This was a warm, compassionate, open, and caring response. The urge to share, to comfort and reassure, was palpable and keenly felt. It was a remarkable moment that stayed with me as a touchstone for the importance of sharing our stories with each other, of breaking down the habit of secrecy.

This idea of keeping secrets, of not sharing our stories, has been an integral part of my own feminist research over the years and was the major impetus for the founding of Arts4Choice (www.arts4choice.com). In 2007, the Ottawa Citizen published an article about the lengthy wait times faced by many women seeking abortions in the National Capital Region. The author claimed that women were not interested in the abortion issue, were not even thinking about abortion, and until they were, nothing would change. Angered by the article, my friend and colleague, Kathryn Palmateer, and I
founded Arts4Choice. The goal of Arts4Choice was to kick-start discussion about women’s real experiences of abortion in Canada, to break the silence and replace secrecy with open and compassionate sharing. We firmly believe that every woman should have the right to a timely abortion on demand, no questions asked. We also believe that no woman should be made to feel fearful or ashamed for having exercised her right to reproductive freedom. We want to show Canadians that women are indeed interested in the abortion issue and that women who have had abortions are their neighbours, sisters, mothers, and friends.

It seemed to us that photographic portraits and personal stories would be the boldest and potentially the most transformative means to achieving the goals of Arts4Choice. Breaking the taboo about discussing women’s abortion experiences in a genuine and accessible way meant that readers must be able to “meet” each woman, almost as though they were sitting around the table together. The portraits and stories, working together, do just this. The result is a deeply personal and political experience for both the readers/viewers and the participants. For many participants, this is the first time they have gone public with their experience, the first time they have taken pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) to write about the events surrounding their abortion(s), the first time they have put their faces forward. For many readers/viewers, this is the first time they have read about women’s abortion experiences, seen the faces of women just like them or their partners. One of our main hopes was that the process and the result would be empowering for both the readers/viewers and the participants.

The response to the project has been overwhelming. The Arts4Choice photos and stories have been part of two Toronto exhibits, have been featured in the Globe and Mail, and were awarded a Multi-Arts Grant in 2008 from the Ontario Arts Council. In 2014, we celebrated the publication of an Arts4Choice book, One Kind Word: Women Share Their Abortion Stories (released by Toronto’s Three O’Clock Press).

But breaking the silence is hard work. It involves courage and compassion, for others and for ourselves. It involves undoing years and years of habitually silencing ourselves about our reproductive lives. The good news is that when one woman shares her abortion experience, she inspires many more to do so as well. Apparently, sharing stories is infectious!

Many women who have taken part in Arts4Choice have mentioned that they would have felt so much less isolated during their abortion experiences
if they had known of other women’s experiences. Again and again, the storytellers mention that one of their motivations for participating is that they do not want other women to feel this same sense of isolation. We care about each other and want to help each other, but, to do this, we must stop keeping parts of our lives secret.

Keeping secrets is not the same as respecting privacy. For many women, having an abortion is a deeply private event in their lives, one that they do not wish to share publicly. But the line between privacy and secrecy can be a thin one. Secrets are invariably tinged with a fear of discovery. Secrets can leave people feeling muzzled, fearful, and ashamed. Privacy, however, involves the ability to determine where and with whom we share information without fear of shame or retribution.

During my years at Arts4Choice, my understanding of the importance of sharing abortion experiences has become more nuanced, and despite the recent change in federal government to a party that identifies itself as pro-choice, I believe that such sharing of stories is becoming even more imperative. It is essential that together we create a safe and accessible space for women to come together to learn from one another and support one another. We must share our abortion stories for many reasons:

• To ensure that women’s lived experiences are front and centre in any abortion debate in this country and to expose the lies of anti-choicers.

• To create, together, safe and accessible spaces for women to come together to learn from one another and support one another. Telling our stories inspires other women to do the same and creates a community of support and activism.

• To provide support for women who are currently making their decision about abortion or who have had an abortion and feel isolated or alone.

• To counter the anti-choice rhetoric that seeks to create a monolithic and negative stereotype about women who have abortions. Women who have abortions are our friends, neighbours, teachers, aunts, nieces, daughters, and political leaders.

• To place abortion and abortion care squarely within the continuum of women’s reproductive lives as a normal and common event.
• To help illuminate the very real problem of access to abortion in Canada today. We need to hear women's real experiences of barriers to reproductive freedom, especially those that are geographical and financial.

• To ensure that women receive excellent medical care and support in hospitals and clinics across the country. Without women stepping forward to report instances of anti-choice pressure or subpar services, problems of quality and accessibility will not be resolved.

The primary lesson underlying my drive to share women's abortion experiences is that we cannot leave the abortion issue in someone else's hands. These are our rights, our bodies, our choices. Our reproductive freedom is our own: we cannot allow others to make decisions for us. Wendy M's story of her pre-Morgentaler abortion in 1986 reminds us of this:

Though it is now quite a long time ago and some of my memories are gone, I remember feeling very daunted by the screening of the Therapeutic Abortion Committee at the hospital. It was clear to me, at every step, that the process could be denied to me. Such a momentous decision about my life was in the hands of others—people who did not know me, people who went home at the end of the day after having done their jobs. I remember being quite frightened. I don't remember talking with anyone about these feelings.