By the time I am five, sexual assault has branded me with shame, fragmented my heart, and bit my tongue with silence. At twelve, a daytime assault in my home coagulates the message that my body is not my own. I hear every demeaning sexual slur and know that, but for the direction of the wind, it could be directed at me. Perhaps this is every woman’s story and I don’t know it. Twelve becomes sixteen—I want to keep my boyfriend, so even though I say no, and mean it, he pushes, and cajoles, and I give in. The social scripts are tedious in their predictability here as elsewhere. At sixteen, date rape isn’t yet a concept in my mind, but pregnancy is. I recoil from the scrutiny: death might be better than public shaming, and my community knows how to shame a “knocked-up slut” to death. I know nothing about safe abortion. My period returns. I have a birth control prescription but feel too ashamed to have it filled at the pharmacy. Besides, I am without a job to pay for it. So I return home and disclose that I am sexually active to my mother,
who helps me. Thank you, Mom. You are loving and kind and supportive, and I need that.

Protections from sexually transmitted infections are unheard of in my teen heterosexual world. I am unaware, uninformed, unprotected, all the while smugly encircled by the preventable pregnancy myth. There is no information, no health class in which to talk about positive relationships, let alone sexual ones, and the role models are caricatures. My girlfriends and I trade information; cautiously, we build our sisterhood. Despite precautions, at least three become unexpectedly pregnant and end up being parents before their time. “Choice” is not a word on any of our lips. Abortion is not even considered, given the public furor over it, led intensely by the Catholic Church, with which our school and community is closely affiliated. Abortion is just not an option for a teen in Prince Edward Island in the early 1980s, nor is it an option for anyone in the province, really.

The PEI Right to Life Association, heavily funded by faith-based organizations, has been aiming to eradicate from the province what few reproductive options we have. Submissions to the Therapeutic Abortion Committees (TACs)—which often result in humiliating, unfair, and debasing trials before a panel of physicians—usually end with denials. In a series of nasty public battles, anti-choice forces target the hospital boards and systematically buy enough membership votes to disband the TACs in the province. The last safe abortion is performed in the Prince County Hospital in 1982, and the last TAC is dissolved in 1986. Women in PEI are left to our own devices. Those who can manage it leave the province and travel long distances to terminate their pregnancies.

When I am twenty-four, I am galvanized to seek out analysis and understanding by the Montréal Massacre of 6 December 1989, when fourteen young engineering students were murdered because they were women. In the aftermath, the women’s movement makes connections among the different types of violence against women: sexual assault, intimate partner violence, external control over our reproductive lives. The confusion and fragmentation of ideas I had felt about the violence are resolved and new understandings emerge through the illumination of feminist perspectives; analysis replaces the silence, and unleashed tongues speak truths. Feminists know how women struggle in all areas of our lives. We are adamant that women must know that our bodies are our own. The concept of reproductive justice emerges: we should get to decide if and when we will have children.
and how many we will have. Without access to affordable, safe abortions, we are not yet equal.

In 1988, when the Supreme Court’s *Morgentaler* decision increases access to abortion for women in the rest of Canada, the PEI legislature responds with Resolution 17, which decrees that ours is an anti-choice province. Women in PEI are to remain without access. Anti-choice lobby groups exercise incredible power, and the PEI government sanctions a Campaign for Life, which involves every Grade 7 student being bussed to the provincial capital for a pro-life rally at the University of PEI’s Student Union Building. The junior high students are subjected to an emotionally charged graphic presentation. To show that they are against abortions, they are all instructed to wear their “little feet” pins, which purport to show the size of a fetus’s feet. I wonder how the Department of Education can get away with such an act, but then, the department’s minister wears his own “little feet” pin on his lapel.

Somehow, feminists persevere in the belief that PEI women will get access to this basic medical procedure, and I join in their optimism, protests, and lobbying, feeling to the depths of my being that genuine equality means access to safe abortion. Without unfettered access as part of a reproductive justice policy, women are second-class citizens. I vow that this will change someday. For a brief time in my early thirties, I work inside government to better understand the PEI health policy environment.

Finally, at forty-four, by then a tenured professor at UPEI, I decide that the moment has arrived to return to reproductive justice, and I begin working on the abortion issue in earnest. I gather a broad research advisory group and create with them the conditions for a participatory action research project. Our goal is to address the unfair situation through an analysis of the impacts of the abortion policies in the province over the last twenty years. Our proposal is turned back by the UPEI ethics review board. Some members, unaccustomed to qualitative approaches and unschooled in participatory action research, block the project, citing it as activism rather than research. This is unprecedented. In previous projects on the impact of tobacco on teen mothers, women leaving violent relationships, and palliative care, I was never told that my research was suspect because I didn’t want to encourage teen smoking, or women staying in violent relationships, or unnecessary suffering while dying. Clearly, this challenge stems from the issue being abortion and my use of activist research methods. Thankfully, the chair of the committee facilitates an external review.
The external review is a stunning fifteen-page endorsement of the project, including an admonishment to the ethics committee for attempting to stop important, ground-breaking research. Citing the need for action research that challenges the status quo, this review is an invigorating turning point in my research journey. I feel the full weight of what our participatory action project is attempting to achieve. While before this enthusiastic endorsement I felt exclusion and derision, I now feel validation from the academy. We want to challenge injustice with academic activism. It becomes clear that the ethics review committee has some members whose own world view blinds them to the value of the research and from whom I will never earn either respect or academic freedom.

Community members embrace the participatory action project with deep and abiding enthusiasm. Ethics approval in hand, we post advertisements on 13 July 2011. Within two days, the online posting receives more than five hundred hits. I easily book interviews for research conversations with PEI women and their family, friends, and physicians who have all been deeply affected by the lack of access to abortion services. Our conversations are rich with details and ideas on how to improve the situation. The participants voice painful realities that clearly express the urgency of changing the status quo. The project is a magnet for volunteers both within and outside the academy: a highly skilled feminist therapist donates many hours to the project, and honours students invest their scholarship in the topic.

The spectre of the anti-choice movement is often larger than its actual effect. Yes, I receive anti-choice harassment emails, but they are few and far between, as are the handful of oppositional phone calls. I think through more contingency plans than I ever need. In early September 2011, I receive a supportive phone call from the vice-president of Research. Both she and the president have met with a sophomore in my department who was protesting my “biased abortion” research and wanted the university administration to intervene. The VP of Research took time out of her day to go over the ethics review process with the student to explain why the project was ethical and to educate her on participatory action research. Later, I discover that she is the student leader for the anti-choice group on campus.

The academy continues to be a paradoxical site of intense support and equally fierce opposition. At a peer-reviewed conference in 2012, I am part of a feminist reproductive justice panel with two other women. Just five minutes into my talk, I am interrupted by an older male audience member challenging
my right to be there—an unprecedented interruption within the collegial environment of a conference where questions are withheld until the speaker finishes. He is successful in halting my presentation for about three minutes while I deal with his protestations. When I finish, several people affirm the value of the work, posing excellent questions. After the presentation, some audience members commiserate with me about the harasser’s misconduct; I see him speaking with several people at the back of the room and wonder if more will come of the exchange. He makes his way to me after the room clears to have a more private conversation. He apologizes for having interrupted me. I ask why he chose to behave so “unprofessionally.” He felt that my presentation violated his sense of “his” discipline, he says, and that I am outside the bounds of acceptable scholarship with my activist standpoint: he expects a more objective perspective. “I couldn’t help myself, I just had to say something, it raised my ire so much!” he says to justify his outburst. Socratically, I ask if he is familiar with qualitative methodologies? With paradigms that question objectivity? With participatory action research or scholarship in action? He is not, but he is certain I do not belong in the academy.

Many academics are becoming tuned into the paradigm shift toward scholarship in action. Together, we are starting a revolution. The revolution may not be funded, but parts of it will be highly subsidized! The University Research Committee grants the project a full internal research grant to help defray costs. This modest amount is awarded without any question, although I did attach the external ethics review to the application, which may have assisted in the committee’s deliberations. Perhaps the colleagues on the ethics committee who were anti-choice and anti-action research actually ended up doing me a favour by having the proposal reviewed so rigorously.

Granted, I could have faced insurmountable obstacles if I hadn’t had a feminist community from which to draw, both in terms of the research and the community outreach. If I hadn’t had an external reviewer who understood the significance of the issue and the validity and appropriateness of the participatory action research design, the project would have stalled. If I hadn’t had a broad community of reproductive justice advocates to bolster the project, it would have failed. Academic activism is done with the community, for the community, and that is making all the difference.

My colleagues and I are still working on changing the status quo. The plan is to take the research findings on the road, back to the community, to have discussions about what participants shared so movingly. A fortuitous
reorganization within the province’s health system resulted in an eradication of the hospital boards, thereby removing their strictures against abortions and, as we discover through our research, opening the system wide for a pro-choice physician to step up. But we need the social conditions for a physician to provide that service. Aside from the direct community discussions about the research, it seems that just giving people the opportunity to express openly how women have been affected by the lack of abortion access has created momentum for community change. For example, our project has provided the necessary spark to inspire a whole new group into action. One young activist publicly credited a research conversation with me for her incipient activism: she discovered new information that made her so angry she decided something had to be done. Within weeks, six young women had organized the PEI Reproductive Rights Organization. They sponsored the first PEI pro-choice rally in more than twenty years on 19 November 2011, created a pro-choice social media campaign, pressured the provincial government, succeeded in having the Province post access-to-abortion information on its website, presented to high school students, garnered national and international coverage about the lack of abortion access in PEI, and engaged in a host of other community actions. That is the value of collective organizing: together, we are making a difference.

As I write this, women still do not have access to abortion in PEI, but my colleagues and I have made changes in that direction. Ours is a story of making connections in an environment that seeks to dissociate, of speaking truths out of shame, of articulating ongoing violence that began with child sexual abuse in a world claiming that our bodies were not our own. It is a story of resistance born out of the everyday challenges to our spirits, minds, and bodies. Our path may be long, but, in the lyrics of Ndidi Onukwulu’s “Move Together,” “We can get there faster if we all move together.”