



Just Listen

By Toni M. Bond

Those of us working in the reproductive health and rights movement know that there are few women who wake up one day and whimsically decide to go get an abortion. Most women who make this decision arrive at it after a great deal of personal soul-searching and personal reflection. For years, some of us in the women's movement, especially women of color, have been saying that there is another piece to the conversation around abortion. That other element is post-abortion.

For too long, there has been a lack of safe spaces where women could talk about their abortion experiences. There has been no place where women could talk about their pain, relief, nagging doubt, release, sadness, etc. The opportunity to privately share some of the feelings of regret (and yes, sometimes anger) at the social and economic circumstances that have forced them to choose abortion as an option. While at the same time, giving voice to the great sense of relief because the option of abortion was available and they gained access to it.

In the eight years I served as the Executive Director of the Chicago Abortion Fund (CAF), roughly 800 to 1,000 women would call each year seeking money to obtain an abortion. Most of the women who called, though firm in their decision, had grappled with coming to terms with making this difficult decision. For some, the issue was their own personal religious beliefs and reconciling the decision not to bring forth life.

The majority of women who called CAF were African American. Abortion in the African American community has long been looked upon as taboo. Abortion has been the topic of many Sunday sermons of "hell-fire and damnation" in the Black church. Some Black nationalists have set forth eugenics and genocide as reasons why Black women must not have abortions. Further offering that abortion is destroying the Black race. Other women who wanted children were confronted with their financial position and inability to take care of a child or an additional child. The reasons have been many and great. Time and again, women shared that they regretted that their life circumstances forced them to make the decision to have an abortion. But in the same breath, they thanked us profusely for being there and helping them obtain a safe abortion.

As a woman who has had four abortions, I know first-hand the complexities of making such an important life decision. My first pregnancy was at the tender age of 12. Adamant that her baby was not having a baby, my mother took me to the nearest abortion clinic. My last three pregnancies were in my teens and early twenties and all three were originally wanted pregnancies. But in the end, life circumstances arose that forced me to make the decision to terminate. From not having sufficient financial income to living in a bad relationship and the highly probable prospect of

single parenthood, I had to rethink my original decision to become a mother and choose abortion as the best option.

I wish there had of been a group like Exhale where I could call and someone would just listen and help me process the many complex emotions I was feeling each time. Emotions about where my decision to have an abortion and my religious upbringing collided. These were all emotions that I was able to work through. More importantly, I found peace with my decisions. But I wonder what would the picture have looked like if there had been someone around to listen and offer support shortly after I had my abortions.

The women's movement has to do the work necessary to move from its hesitancy to discuss post-abortion counseling. It is incumbent upon us to give post-abortion counseling serious consideration and discussion. Just as we say a woman takes time to weigh seriously all her options. I think it stands to reason that she would also take just as much time reflecting on her decision, as well as even having a moment where she questioned whether she made the right decision.

I know had my life circumstances been different, I may have had other options and made different decisions. Yet, I am glad that abortion was an option that I could access. Were they easy decisions? Unequivocally, no. Were they a big deal? To me they were. They were some of the most difficult decisions I have ever made and I realize the privilege I was afforded in being able to make them. But it would have been refreshing to have someone affirming and supporting the decisions I made.

It's one thing to talk to the clinic counselor the day of the abortion but it's something different when you're reflecting and seeking support for the decision you've made. What I appreciate most about Exhale is their approach. As an organization that respects reproductive freedom, they have figured out how to have room for all perspectives and complexities of abortion. Just like, I'm sure, many of the women who call them.

(Toni M. Bond is the Co-Founder, President/CEO of African American Women Evolving, Inc. (AAWE). AAWE's mission is the increase the activism and leadership of Black women around reproductive health. AAWE further works to examine and draw the connections between other social justice and basic human rights issues that directly and indirectly affect Black women's ability to exercise complete autonomy over their lives and bodies.)