

June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## **Women First Digital Submission to Meta Oversight Board on [US Posts Discussing Abortion](#)**

Women First Digital (WFD), a global leader in digital support for self-managed abortion, submits the following public comment in response to the Meta Oversight Board’s “United States posts discussing abortion” cases. Given our realm of expertise, we specifically address the Oversight Board’s first point of public comment: “Meta’s moderation of content on Facebook and Instagram related to abortion.” **We urge Meta to examine its role in the digital suppression of safe abortion content, the proliferation of abortion mis- and disinformation, and its obligation to combat the abortion infodemic** that has been allowed to thrive across its social media platforms through responsible, informed content moderation.

### **Contextualizing abortion care**

The global abortion landscape has fundamentally transformed within recent years. It is imperative that Meta understands this transformation in order to appropriately contextualize its evolving role and responsibilities, and weigh the high-stakes public health implications of its abortion-related content moderation policies. In today’s post-Covid, post-*Roe* era, Meta is not simply a moderator of online abortion discourse, but an essential gatekeeper to safe abortion information and care.

Online conversations around abortion are evolving because abortion care itself is evolving. Medication abortion (MA), or abortion with pills, now accounts for a significant portion of abortions worldwide. In the United States, for example, more than 50% of all abortions are medication abortions;<sup>1</sup> in India, this number is placed at 81%;<sup>2</sup> and in countries across Europe, MA accounts “for solid to vast majorities – roughly 50% to 90% of all induced abortions.”<sup>3</sup> This swell in the use of medication to terminate pregnancies is in part due to its overwhelming safety.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, growing access to MA has been credited for global declines in maternal morbidity and mortality<sup>5</sup> and is recognized for its potential to promote safe abortion worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

Abortion pills can be used both within and outside of formal clinical settings, the latter commonly referred to as a self-managed abortion with pills. Once considered inferior to in-clinic abortion care, self-managed abortion (SMA) has earned newfound legitimacy within the medical community, particularly accelerated by the need for remote models of care during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Today, SMA is widely accepted as a safe and effective option for pregnancy termination<sup>8</sup> and has been recognized by the WHO for its ability to reduce

obstacles to safe abortion through lowered cost, minimized travel, shortened waiting times, reduced exposure to stigma, and increased autonomy.<sup>9</sup>

As safe abortion care continues to move outside the confines of clinics, it is critical to underscore that the safety of SMA is contingent upon access to accurate information and quality resources; like all self-care practices in medicine, it is particularly vulnerable to mis- and disinformation. Anti-abortion activists have seized upon this vulnerability to dissuade, confuse, shame, and endanger those who seek safe care, particularly on Meta's platforms. Concurrently, well-established sexual and reproductive health organizations are becoming increasingly vocal about patterns of content suppression and censorship on social media, specifically Meta platforms, which has limited the visibility of safe and accurate abortion information.<sup>10, 11, 12, 13</sup> (We share below some examples of WFD safe abortion content that has been taken down by Meta platforms without clear reasoning.) Together, abortion disinformation and safe abortion content suppression has fueled an infodemic surrounding abortion in online spaces.<sup>14</sup>

Abortion's vulnerability to disinformation has been all the more exacerbated in the US by the recent *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ruling. As access to in-clinic care rapidly shrinks across states, abortion seekers are flooding the internet in search of reliable information and resources.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when crafting policies that govern the moderation of abortion-related content, Meta must recognize that the visibility of accurate information on its platforms is a key determinant of public safety that is actively under attack by anti-abortion activists and has vast implications for the safety and wellbeing of pregnant people around the world.

WFD urges Meta to adopt the following practices in its moderation of abortion content:

1. Establish internal sexual and reproductive health expertise at Meta, either through consulting advisors, a dedicated task force, or high-level trainers, that can build internal capacity to distinguish safe, accurate abortion content from unsafe, misinformed, or disinforming content.
2. Evaluate the quality of abortion content using current, informed, evidence-based standards of care that recognize the safety, acceptability, and growing prevalence of self-managed abortion outside of clinical settings.
3. Flag abortion misinformation and disinformation across Meta's platforms, much like Meta implemented in response to Covid-19 and 2020 US election fraud mis- and disinformation.
4. Provide increased transparency around Meta moderation policies, with clear, consistent, and specific criteria for policy compliance.
5. Create easy-to-reach, direct touchpoints for appeal within Meta that are specifically dedicated to handle sexual and reproductive health content review, and that can spare sexual and reproductive health teams from navigating the painstaking and often exhaustively redundant appeal process.

It is our hope that by better understanding today’s evolving abortion landscape, Meta will rise to its responsibility of ensuring that opinion is not conflated with fact, that mis- and disinformation does not eclipse accurate medical information, and that the politicization of abortion does not negate that abortion is and always will be an essential component of sexual and reproductive healthcare.

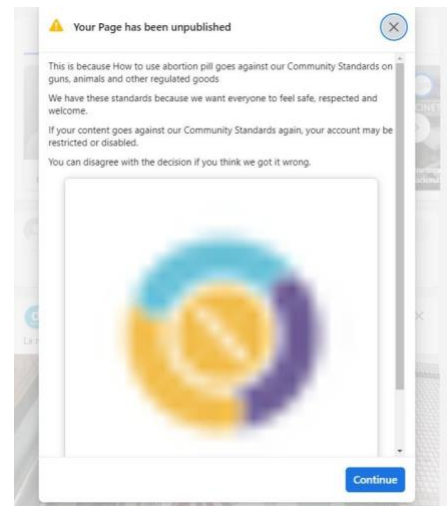
### **About Women First Digital**

[Women First Digital](#) (WFD) is an eHealth social enterprise that leverages the power of the digital revolution to make sexual and reproductive self-care more universally and equitably accessible. WFD hosts three global sexual and reproductive health brands: [safe2choose.org](#), [howtouseabortionpill.org](#) and [findmymethod.org](#).

### **Samples of Meta suppression**

As part of the ongoing abortion infodemic that thrives across social media, WFD has experienced repeated instances of content suppression and censorship on Meta platforms. Below are samples of this suppression:

- On May 4th, 2023, Facebook unpublished the Facebook page of WFD’s brand [HowToUseAbortionPill.org](#) without warning, citing only that “How to use abortion pill goes against our community standards on guns, animals and other regulated goods.” HowToUse is a platform designed to share information about safe abortion, and does not provide any products or services. Multiple appeals through proper Facebook channels were denied. It was only upon the direct intervention of Amnesty International that our account was restored.



- On June 10th, 2022, WFD’s Facebook Ads Manager was temporarily blocked due to a content violation. A post that triggered this block was from WFD’s brand safe2choose, which clarified the difference between emergency contraception and abortion pills. We believe this post was flagged simply for depicting illustrations of pills. Other [posts that depicted pills](#) drew similar warnings.



- In June 2021, Facebook rejected a WFD ad that featured information in Spanish about how to use abortion pills safely. Facebook’s justification of the ad rejection was that “it mentions politicians or is about sensitive social issues that could influence public opinion, how people vote and may affect the outcome of an election or pending legislation.” To clarify, the post shared exclusively medical information.



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