

# SPEAKING ABOUT SELF-MANAGED ABORTION WITH PILLS. A PRACTICAL GUIDE.





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# [01.]

## INTRODUCTION

Medical abortion is the termination of a pregnancy through the use of pills. The medicines used for medical abortion are called Mifepristone and Misoprostol.

They cause a process similar to a natural miscarriage. Medical abortion is often also called “abortion with pills” or “medication abortion,”

Self-managed medical abortion is the use of abortion pills to end a pregnancy outside of established medical settings. Self-managed abortion may also be called “self-induced abortion,” “self-administered abortion,” “self-sourced abortion” or “home abortion”.

Provided people have correct information, self-managing an abortion in early pregnancy has been proven safe and effective and is common throughout the world.

Information about self-managing abortion safely has empowering potential as it aids women in protecting their lives and health, yet speaking about it can be a challenge.



The purpose of this guide is to support those sharing information on abortion through a variety of media and contexts.

It is a practical guide that has been created by the trainers of Women Help Women, ([www.womenhelp.org](http://www.womenhelp.org)), who have worked for more than a decade on programs for self-managed abortions in restrictive settings. It was created specifically to support the Mobilizing Activists around Medical Abortion (MAMA) in Sub-Saharan countries, a network that Women Help Women co-convenes. Women Help Women would like to acknowledge the excellent materials of inroads, COMs project, IPPF, Sea Change Program and the SIA Legal Team. We have adapted some of their recommendations to the context of self-managed abortion in restrictive settings.



*Note on the language: \* Women Help Women recognizes that gender-specific terms do not encompass the rights and identities of all people that may seek to end a pregnancy. We believe everyone has the right to feel supported and respected during their abortion experience.*

# [02.]



## WHY IS INFORMATION ABOUT ABORTION PILLS NEEDED?

According to the World Health Organization, 56 million women each year choose to have an abortion. Abortion is one of the most common medical procedures globally, yet many people do not have safe access to abortion services and are forced to risk their lives and health. Unsafe abortion is a leading cause of maternal mortality as approximately 1 in every 300 people who have an unsafe abortion die as a result.

Self-managed abortion with pills is a growing phenomenon worldwide allowing for safe abortions despite legal restrictions. Abortion does not have to be unsafe because it is conducted outside of official legal and medical systems.

Information services such as safe abortion hotlines (currently in approximately 20 countries), community programs and online services like Women Help Women contribute to protecting health and increasing reproductive autonomy and freedom. Supporting access to abortion with pills is a tool of empowerment and a rebellion against a system of reproductive control.

### [3.1] Abortion Stigma

Feelings and opinions about abortion may be complex. In many societies, abortion is a taboo and silenced topic. Even when there is support for legalizing abortion, people may still favor restrictions on access.

#### **What is Abortion Stigma?**

Abortion stigma is the shared belief that abortion is wrong and/or morally unacceptable within a community or society. It underlies much of the rhetoric in anti-choice actions and in the general discourse about abortion.

Stigma manifests on multiple levels: media and public discourse, institutions and systems, legal regulations, community beliefs, personal beliefs and self-judgment. It can manifest in the form of restrictive laws, barriers to access, poor medical care, negative beliefs about the kinds of people that seek abortion in general, and especially those who self-manage.

Abortion stigma is a ‘cumulative stigma’ in that it builds on other forms of discrimination and structural injustices. Ultimately, abortion stigma serves to marginalize an essential medical process, discredit those who would provide or pro-

cure it, and undermine those who advocate for its legality and accessibility.

With independent use of abortion medicines, often in settings with oppressive laws and norms, the effects of stigma are compounded. This is because the manner in which people are ending their pregnancies falls outside of the law, the control of medical officials and of socially accepted behavior.

In this context, intentionally or not, someone who self-manages their abortion is committing a political act by refusing to submit to various oppressive systems. By taking control, people who self-manage their abortions are often rejecting established systems of law, social norms, religious traditions and personal beliefs. Those that help them take a stand of disobedience against systematic oppression and injustice.

### [3.2 ] Frameworks for Discussing Abortion

Providing information about medical abortion is relevant to health, human rights and social justice. The work for abortion rights can be described from several different perspectives, and all of these frameworks can be tailored depending on your audience.

#### **Public Health**

Abortion has historically been seen as a public health issue. Unsafe abortion contributes to maternal mortality and morbidity, which are completely preventable if safe abortion is

available. Restrictive laws do not reduce the number of abortions. Legal restrictions only increase the likelihood that women will resort to unsafe practices which is thoroughly documented by scientific research.

### **Harm Reduction**

The harm reduction framework highlights strategies to preserve health in situations where policies and practices prohibit, stigmatize and drive common human activities underground. This approach recognizes that taking abortion medicines at home with support is safer than obtaining illegal surgical abortion procedures, and that if abortion is going to happen anyway, then it should be made as safe as possible.

### **Human Rights**

Lack of access to safe abortion and contraception is a violation of human rights. Those rights include the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to be free from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, the right to privacy and confidentiality, and the right to health information and education. There has been growing global recognition of the fact that obstacles to abortion care are a systemic violation of human rights. The United Nations, human rights courts, Council of Europe and the World Health Organization openly support access to safe and legal abortion.

## **Reproductive Justice**

The focus is on recognizing and fighting oppression. Reproductive justice is based on the understanding that the negative impacts of class, gender, race and sexual identity are interwoven, creating a paradigm of intersectionality. Lack of access to abortion is linked to systemic marginalization as disadvantaged communities experience the most challenges to access. Health, justice and safety should never be determined by social, racial or economic status. Access to abortion is therefore a matter of justice and ethics.



# [04.]

## TALKING ABOUT SELF-MANAGED ABORTIONS

### [4.1] What to Communicate - Facts or Values?

In presenting the realities of abortion, facts and statistics are critical. Due to the stigmatized nature of the topic people are generally not aware of the actual public health and legal contexts. However, to effectively communicate about abortion and resonate with the public, it is unwise to engage in only in a battle of facts. Talking about abortion has been found to be most effective and powerful when the communicator focuses on values-based messaging. Essentially, values-based messaging is about communicating positive values that will resonate deeply with your audiences.

#### Facts

Prepare accurate and evidence-based information.

Include:

- Abortion statistics in your country, maternal mortality rates, contraceptive use
- Evidence about impact of unsafe abortion
- Evidence about safety of self-managed abortion with ap-

appropriate support

- Relevant human rights and legal arguments (treaties, right to provide and receive information often protected by constitutions)
- References and source lists for additional scientific information

Recognize that in all countries, whatever the law, abortion is a common occurrence, and that the impacts of unsafe abortion are completely preventable by decriminalizing abortion and increasing access to information and safe methods.

### Values

Establish your values. Communicate your positive ideas and your vision of the world, your respect for individuals, a just society and your commitment to help.

Examples of the spectrum of values include:

### **Autonomy and Diversity:**

- Only a pregnant person can know whether now is the time to carry a pregnancy to term and only they have a right to make this decision. When someone has decided to end a pregnancy, they should be able to decide on the type of care that will best meet their needs and situation.
- Women are moral agents who have the right to make decisions about their fertility. These decisions must be respected.

### **Safety and Health:**

- How a person decides to end a pregnancy is their own decision, whether that is within or outside of the established medical community. As with all medical processes, it deserves to be safe, legally and medically.
- Public safety and health policy should be based on sound scientific evidence, not ideology.

### **Access to Information:**

- Information is power. Everyone deserves the right to know objective, evidence-based information. Abortion with pills is safe.

### **Ethical Commitment to Just Society, Equality and Human Rights:**

- We have an obligation to promote evidence-based information that shows the safety of the medical abortion process. Censorship is harmful and leads to unsafe abortions.
- Where state and public systems fail to support citizens, people must help each other to stay safe and healthy. Community health workers and activists promote human rights by supporting access to information and expanding access to safe methods.

### **Empowerment:**

- It is moral and just to take control over your own life and to help others to do so.

- Women that receive information become stronger to take decisions over their life and can advocate for the rights of others. Those that help them show resistance against oppressive systems and laws.

## [4.2] Tailoring your answers

### Who Is Your Audience?

It is important to know your audience and your context. Different arguments and frameworks should be prioritized depending on what kind of group you're speaking to: healthcare professionals, journalists, community activists or women that might need help.

### Four Categories of Questions

The questions you will get from any audience will almost always refer to these categories:

- **Your project (what do you do? why?)**
- **Abortion pills and their safety**
- **Legality**
- **Morality**



## Practical Tips

### **Practical tips how to handle even most challenging questions:**

1. Prepare. When preparing for public speaking it is helpful to develop a few key messages in your own words that are specific to your audience. You may want to use examples or anecdotes, but must always avoid breaking any confidentiality. Write down your points and learn them by heart.
2. When questioned, first think about the actual issue that is raised and which of the 4 aspects presented above, the question touches upon. Then, focus your answer on creating a bridge to your key message by presenting your core values and facts.
3. Create an opportunity to communicate positive values that resonate with your specific audience, and to tell your narrative to the public. Even the most difficult and stigmatizing questions allow you to answer in empowering and positive ways.
4. Stay calm. Try not to repeat the stigmatized, stereotypical or provocative statements or words that are in the questions.
5. Always come back to your project and your mission. After each answer include some information about your campaign, and how it creates positive impact.

## Examples of Challenging Questions/Statements and Answers

**Your project**

What is this campaign about?

This is the launch of a campaign to provide information how Misoprostol can be used for safe abortion (and to prevent heavy bleeding). The information is based on the protocols of the World Health Organization.

A hotline with number (give number) has been established to provide information to people that need abortion.

What kind of information is given?

This campaign informs women on how they can have a safe abortion at home with Misoprostol (also called Cytotec), a medicine that is available in (insert country here). It also informs them how to safely use Misoprostol for safe birth and gives additional information on sexual health. The aim of this action is to help people stay healthy and well-informed.

Do you promote abortions with this campaign?

We provide accurate and essential medical and scientific information. This information is reliable. Everybody has the right to have this information, and to make decisions about their own lives.

How can women get the pills?

Misoprostol is available in pharmacies under the name (insert brand names common to region here) and can be also obtained online through non-profit organizations like Women Help Women.

Misoprostol is on the list of essential medicines of the World Health Organization as it treats numerous medical conditions. It is used in obstetrics and gynaecology for prevention of and treatment for postpartum haemorrhage as well as post-abortion and miscarriage care and it is also used to treat ulcers and arthritis.

**Abortion with pills**

Is it dangerous for women to take pills on their own?

An abortion with pills is very safe and effective to do at home in the first trimester of pregnancy. Millions of people have done abortions at home in United States and Europe and it is standard practice there. Misoprostol is on the list of essential medicines of the World Health Organization.

Could you explain how Misoprostol works?

Misoprostol causes miscarriage – bleeding from the vagina. To cause a miscarriage in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, a woman needs 12 pills of Misoprostol. 4 tablets of Misoprostol are put under the tongue, then another 4 tablets under the tongue after 3 hours, and again after another 3 hours with 4 tablets under the tongue. (or provide protocol for Mifepristone and Misoprostol use)

In cases of birth without a skilled birth attendant like a doctor or a midwife, Misoprostol causes the womb to contract after delivery, reducing bleeding and expelling the placenta more quickly. Immediately after giving birth (before the placenta has come out), women should put 3 tablets under their tongue. Misoprostol can also be used to treat heavy bleeding after birth.

But in other countries isn't medical abortion done only under doctor supervision?

An abortion with pills is very similar to a miscarriage. Most miscarriages are handled by women themselves without a doctor's supervision. Scientific evidence shows that women are perfectly capable to self-manage abortions, when they have reliable information. In many countries (e.g. in Europe and in the USA) misoprostol is taken by people themselves at home.

Doesn't abortion hurt women emotionally?

Any decisions may or may not trigger emotions, and abortion is no exception. The most commonly reported feeling after abortion is relief. Women self-managing their abortions deserve additional support as it is not being provided by medical staff and carries additional stress due to concerns of legal repercussions. Claims that abortion leads to psychological disorders are misleading and untrue. Lack of support is what hurts women, which is why good support from family, from health workers and from communities is imperative.

What are medical complications that can happen?

The risk of complication is very low. Complications are exactly the same as with cases of spontaneous miscarriage, and include heavy bleeding and infection. These complications are very rare and because a miscarriage happens in 15-20% of all pregnancies, medical providers know how to treat them. Women can always safely seek additional care from any health-care provider and because the pills cause the same process that would occur in a natural miscarriage, there is no way for medical workers to see the difference.

**Legal aspects**

Is it illegal to give this information?

It is a human right to get and give information. Information is powerful and allows people to make the best decisions for themselves. This campaign gives information based on scientific research about the use of Misoprostol to prevent heavy bleeding during birth and for safe abortions at home.

Don't you have to respect the laws in this country?

(Number in your region) women have abortions here whatever the law, and what is most important is that they know how to do it safely. This information protects women's health and providing this information is a sign of respect for people's lives. It is simply our duty to share this information. However we may feel about abortion, it's not our place to make that decision for someone else.

Abortion is illegal in this country, why would you promote illegal activities?

Current abortion law hurts women. XXX women have abortions every year in this country, as it is a common fact of life. Access to abortion is a right, a social good and a matter of social justice. Especially young, unmarried, poor or vulnerable populations cannot get safe abortions and face additional penalties and stigma. We are committed to changing that for the sake of equality and justice. Instead of limiting access to safe abortion options, we need to improve health and a woman's ability to make the best reproductive health decisions for herself. Our laws should support and safeguard a woman's health whether she is receiving abortion care at a medical facility or whether she has obtained the medicines independently.

**Moral aspects**

Abortion is immoral/against my beliefs/not what God wants. Each person should be able to make her own decision regarding pregnancy, and if they desire, to end that pregnancy in the manner that best fits them. I don't want to make such an important decision for anyone else—that's simply not my place.

Isn't abortion murder?

Access to misoprostol is a social good. If a woman uses it immediately after giving birth it can reduce the risk of heavy bleeding by half and prevent many deaths as a result. In this country, every year XXX women have abortions. These women make a private, moral and responsible decision. These women are your mothers, friends, sisters and daughters. Many already have children and are making the decision that they feel is best for their family. This is a personal decision that everybody should make for themselves.

When does life begin?

Lots of people have different opinions about when life begins, and this may impact how they view abortion. People can decide for themselves what beliefs or arguments they are willing to accept regarding the start of life. Those who believe that life begins at conception, or at some other point in the pregnancy may still choose to have abortions. Decisions about whether to end a pregnancy, choose adoption, or raise a child are best made by the pregnant person. It's not for politicians to interfere. Our job is to promote people's health and well-being as they decide if and how to end a pregnancy, not to impose our beliefs on others.

### Confidentiality and Legal Aspects

Sometimes you may be asked to reveal personal data of people involved, or for a connection to someone that has had an abortion. You may simply explain that you respect the privacy of every person who has an abortion, and the trust they placed in you. For safety and confidentiality reasons, it is always better to refer to organizations instead of individuals, unless they are official spokespersons. When asked about the number of people that receive support through your campaign, you may want to just reaffirm that whomever contacts the campaign always receives confidential and evidence-based information.

**In each country, prepare by clarifying local laws on:**

- The status of freedom of information laws (most countries have these laws in the Constitution and constitutional provisions have priority over other local laws). It is important to know whether there have been court cases concerning the freedom of information laws and what the decisions in these cases have been.
- Whether there are any statutes that specifically outlaw giving information about abortion and whether anyone has ever been prosecuted for giving information about abortion. Those can be challenged with human rights treaties, providing for freedom of information and speech.
- The legal definition of intent to commit a crime, or helping somebody to commit a crime. Usually this is not relevant, as these laws tend to refer to crimes with very severe punishment. However, it is important to confirm that the legal definition does not include abortion.
- Whether it is mandatory to denounce or report a woman who has induced or received an abortion.
- Relevant human rights treaties and agreements. States are accountable for those, and should provide reproductive health services.



# [05.]

## EXAMPLES

### COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES



In this chapter we present selected communication strategies that have been used by organizations that work in communities on self-managed abortion, and have included some tips and best practices.

## [5.1] Press Interviews

Interviews for traditional media, such as printed and online press, radio or television shows have potential to reach broad populations.

### **General tips:**

- Prepare your basic facts
- You may know more about the topic than the reporter. Reporters work on many topics, so do not assume they already know anything about abortion.
- Do not speak in too sophisticated (legal or medical) language or professional jargon. You want the information to

- be passed on to the broader population.
- Do not talk “off the record.” Everything you say may be quoted, even if a journalist is trying to get some inside, “off the record” information from you.
  - Journalists are under time pressure, and usually quote only a part of your answers. Speak to the point and use sound bites (short, to the point phrases).
  - Since your time and your quotes are limited, recognize the problems, but focus more on solutions (potential of medical abortion, your campaign), core values and very basic facts.
  - Protect the confidentiality and privacy of those that use abortion pills. Journalists often want a unique story of somebody that has used the medicines. Instead, you can share your experience as a counselor, and tell the stories anonymously.
  - Don’t give interviews on the fly
  - Say you are in the middle of something, ask the deadline and the focus/scope of the story, and say you’ll call back in 10 minutes. That gives you time to put together your top talking points.
  - Speak slowly and keep it simple. Repeat your main points. Speak in full sentences; do not answer only “yes” or “no.”
  - Do not get sidetracked or nervous if the journalist continues to ask you the same question or uses silence as a trick to make you speak more. Tell only what you want to say, even if you have to state the same content more than once.

### **The rule of 3 main points:**

Usually traditional media prepare very short reports, and do not cover the topic extensively. It is best to prepare up to 3 main points that you will mention continuously, and add to your brief answers. Ask yourself which 3 points you want to have in any information that appears.

Example of 3 main points:

- Abortion with pills is safe.
- For abortion with pills in the first trimester of pregnancy, 12 Misoprostol tablets are needed (or 1 Mifepristone and 4 Misoprostol).
- Everybody can call the hotline at this number: (give number if launching hotline) and get confidential, reliable information and support on how to have a safe abortion.

## **[5.2] Letter to the Editor or an Opinion Piece**

A letter to the editor is a written way of talking to a newspaper, magazine, or other regularly printed publication. This is a way of reaching a wide audience and generating public discussion of your issue. Letters to the editor are a great way to increase awareness of the issues that you or your organization are working for, as well as to advocate for your cause.

### **How to write a letter to the editor:**

- Check the word limit of the paper you are writing for.
- Your first sentence is extremely important. Grab the reader's attention right away and let them know why you are writing. Your first sentence should make the reader want to read the whole letter.
- Get to the point quickly and concisely. Explain your issue and why it is important. Use clear language. If you want readers to take a specific action, tell them!
- Be sure to write your full name (and title, if relevant) and to include your address, phone number, and e-mail address. Newspapers won't print anonymous letters, though in some cases they may withhold your name on request.

## **[5.3] Social Media & Blogs**

Social media presents an opportunity for every activist and group to connect to their people individually, at the community level and globally. It allows for both mass communication and intimate exchange while serving as an information source, a community of support or a rallying cry. Examples of social media are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+, YouTube, LinkedIn etc...

Social media is useful as a tool to support efforts to change norms, shift the public narrative, and advocate for policy and

legal changes. A social media strategy requires some thinking around how to effectively reach your intended audiences, how to engage your audience with your messages and how people you reach can take action to contribute to your objectives. A blog can be used to share information and provide commentary on a particular subject or topic of interest.

Below, is some basic guidance for creating and maintaining social media platforms and blogs that support your cause and connect you to your audience.

### **Getting started:**

*What is your mission and what are your goals?*

Creating your online profile is your chance to decide how you want to be viewed by the world. Be clear about your mission: Are you raising awareness? Seeking support? Organizing? Developing a clear and focused narrative from conception will guide you through your later work.

*Who is your audience?*

Are you trying to connect to people in need of help? To interested community members, people that need support, other organizations working in the field? Always keep this in mind when creating media profiles and creating content.

*Make it personal:*

Your audience wants to know who you are, why you are and where you hope to go. What is your organization's story? Why do you do this work? You can share the beliefs and values you hold as a group, your reactions to stories etc.

*Types of posts:*

Posts may include pictures, articles, essays, calls to action, statements or memes. Keep the theme of your posts aligned to your cause and your work. Posts are also opportunities to guide your audience to your website or blog if you have one, so post links that connect to them.

*Use the A-word:*

Societal stigma around abortion in general, and especially self-managed abortion, often dictates that this cause and those who work in it belong in the shadows. Do not avoid the term 'abortion.'

*Be responsive:*

As you grow more successful, people will interact with you; they may post comments, messages etc. to your sites and blog. To build and maintain this channel, it's important to respond in a timely manner so people feel heard and valued.

You may also get messages from people that need your help, so have something in place to route people to support if it's needed.

## [5.4 ] Community dissemination strategies

There are many strategies to share information about abortion with pills.

- Examples of effective communication channels:
- Hotlines (publicized numbers where people can call and get live support from the counselors providing reliable information)
- Websites, including online services and blogs\*
- Chats and mobile communicators\*
- Online discussion forums\*
- Workshops with other groups to create cascade effects to spread information
- Conferences, meetings and professional events



### Visibility actions:

These can include spreading information about medical abor-

tion via:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stickers</li> <li>• Fliers</li> <li>• Graffiti</li> <li>• T-shirts</li> <li>• Handkerchiefs</li> <li>• Banners</li> <li>• Street theater and performance</li> <li>• Concerts</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misoprostol songs and poetry</li> <li>• Street marches and demonstrations</li> <li>• Flash mobs</li> </ul> |
|--|---|

*\* Note on security (year 2017): When using digital platforms, such as websites or communicators, it is essential to consider the safety of the medium, privacy and confidentiality. In general it is always better to use platforms that are open source, because of transparency around how the code is created, and what data is being kept, for which purposes. It is advised to use online communicators such as wire or signal, and for example jitsi for conferencing, and to choose secure activist-led hosts and servers.*



#### ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION

Women Help Women

**WEB:** [HTTPS://WOMENHELP.ORG/](https://womenhelp.org/)

**EMAIL:** [INFO@WOMENHELP.ORG](mailto:info@womenhelp.org)

**TWITTER:** @WOMENHELPORG

**FACEBOOK:** WOMENHELPWOMENINTERNATIONAL

MAMA Network

**MOBILIZING ACTIVISTS** around **MEDICAL ABORTION (MAMA).**

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