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Women on Web

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Pills, Clicks and Bans

Auditing Access to Abortion and Reproductive Rights on Google

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In Collaboration with Women on Web

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Overview

The World Health Organization (WHO) outlines abortion as a safe and common intervention that is vital to the health and well-being of women, pregnant people, and girls.[1] When abortion care is inaccessible, it not only risks the life, health, and well-being of the care seeker, but it violates their human rights including the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and right to freely and responsibly choose when to give birth.[2] Despite being recognized internationally as an essential part of regular health care, reproductive health and abortion care often face limitations and/or restrictions, intersectional and logistical barriers, and stigma. Increasingly those barriers are digital as well as physical.

Women on Web (WoW) is a Canada-based non-profit organization that facilitates online access to abortion pills in restrictive contexts worldwide. The organization is operated by an international team of activists, coordinators, researchers, and health workers who support care seekers in 16 languages and 188 countries. Women on Web was first founded in 2005 and has supported access to safe abortion with pills for over 166,000 people since then and has responded to 1,700,000 emails from care seekers around the globe. WoW provides a safe service that meets a clear demand and counteracts the growing prevalence of abortion misinformation. Research has specifically found that Women on Web provides an important telemedicine experience that advances women's health and reproductive rights especially in countries that prohibit medical abortions.[3]

Over the years, WoW's position as an online abortion care provider has evolved into, as the organization calls it, "operating at the intersection of digital technology and abortion access".[4] Their advocacy role has shifted from solely abortion provision and access to encompassing digital rights activism as well. The organization functions entirely online, operating a website that provides users with information and resources on abortion, and a link to fill out a consultation to obtain mail-order abortion pills if they want. If the user qualifies (i.e., is within the appropriate pregnancy length, has no restrictive contraindications or health concerns, located in a region serviced by the organization, etc.), they are then asked to donate to the organization and provided with instructions on how to use abortion pills. Once confirmed, the pills are shipped to the requester, who is provided with tracking information and support throughout the process.

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[1] "Abortion," The World Health Organization, accessed September 30, 2025, https://www.who.int/health-topics/abortion#tab=tab_1

[2] "Abortion: Key Facts," The World Health Organization, effective May 17, 2024, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion

[3] Vishwadha Chander, "In states with restricted abortion laws, women seek online options," *Reuters*, November 15, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-abortion-telemedicine/in-states-with-restrictive-abortion-laws-women-seek-online-options-idUSKBN1XP25E/

[4] "About Women on Web". Women on Web International, accessed October 15, 2025, https://www.womenonweb.org/en/women-on-web/

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WoW has had to navigate a tumultuous global legal environment that affects its mission country by country. For every victory, including decriminalization in South Korea[5] and legalization in countries like Ireland[6] and Argentina, there have also been setbacks, such as Poland's near ban of abortions in 2020,[7] or a reversal of access in the United States.[8] Organizations that provide access to sexual and reproductive health services have had to adapt to shifting landscapes to accommodate care seekers. These changes coincide with declining trust globally in the information environment, leaving online abortion services – such as non-profits like WoW – responsible for both provision and informing the public about their rights or loss of rights.

WoW's website is its primary point of contact with clients. Over the years, the organization has improved their website to result in higher numbers of consultations, finding that its online traffic more closely represented users purposefully seeking WoW's services. These organizational costs have been significant, however, with WoW having spent nearly $430,000 CAD between 2020 and 2024 as it has had to adapt its digital strategy in the face of censorship and instances of algorithmic suppression. This report examines the reasons search results became a central problem for WoW, and, more broadly, the state of online access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Data from this project draws on steps outlined in a parallel report, The Life Cycle of a Data Audit: A Guide to Developing a Data Inventory to Track Possible Instances of Suppression or Censorship,[9] which explains how we collected and analyzed the data.

Web Traffic and Censorship

Google is the most influential search engine in the world. People across the world use its services to access health information. For WoW, Google is the top search engine used to access its website. The organization spends a lot of its limited resources on Google search engine optimization (SEO), a set of marketing strategies for improving a site's visibility in search results and optimizing its reach. Being at the top of Google's first page is not only difficult, but subject to

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[5] Susanné Seong-eun Bergsten, "South Korea Still Blocking Abortion," *Human Rights Watch*, June 11, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/11/south-korea-still-blocking-abortion

[6] "Abortion law in Ireland," *Abortion Rights Campaign*, accessed October 15, 2025: https://www.abortionrightscampaign.ie/abortion-law-in-ireland/

[7] "Poland's Constitutional Tribunal Rolls Back Reproductive Rights," *Amnesty International*, effective October 22, 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/10/polands-constitutional-tribunal-rolls-back-reproductive-rights/

[8] Nina Totenberg & Sarah McCammon, "Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, ending right to abortion upheld for decades", *National Public Radio (NPR)*, June 24, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/06/24/1102305878/supreme-court-abortion-roe-v-wade-decision-overturn

[9] Erin Hassard, Fenwick McKelvey and Stefanie Duguay, "The Life Cycle of a Data Audit: A Guide to Developing a Data Inventory to Track Possible Instances of Suppression or Censorship. Digital," *Digital Intimacy, Gender, and Sexuality Lab* (2026): Concordia University. Montréal, Quebec.

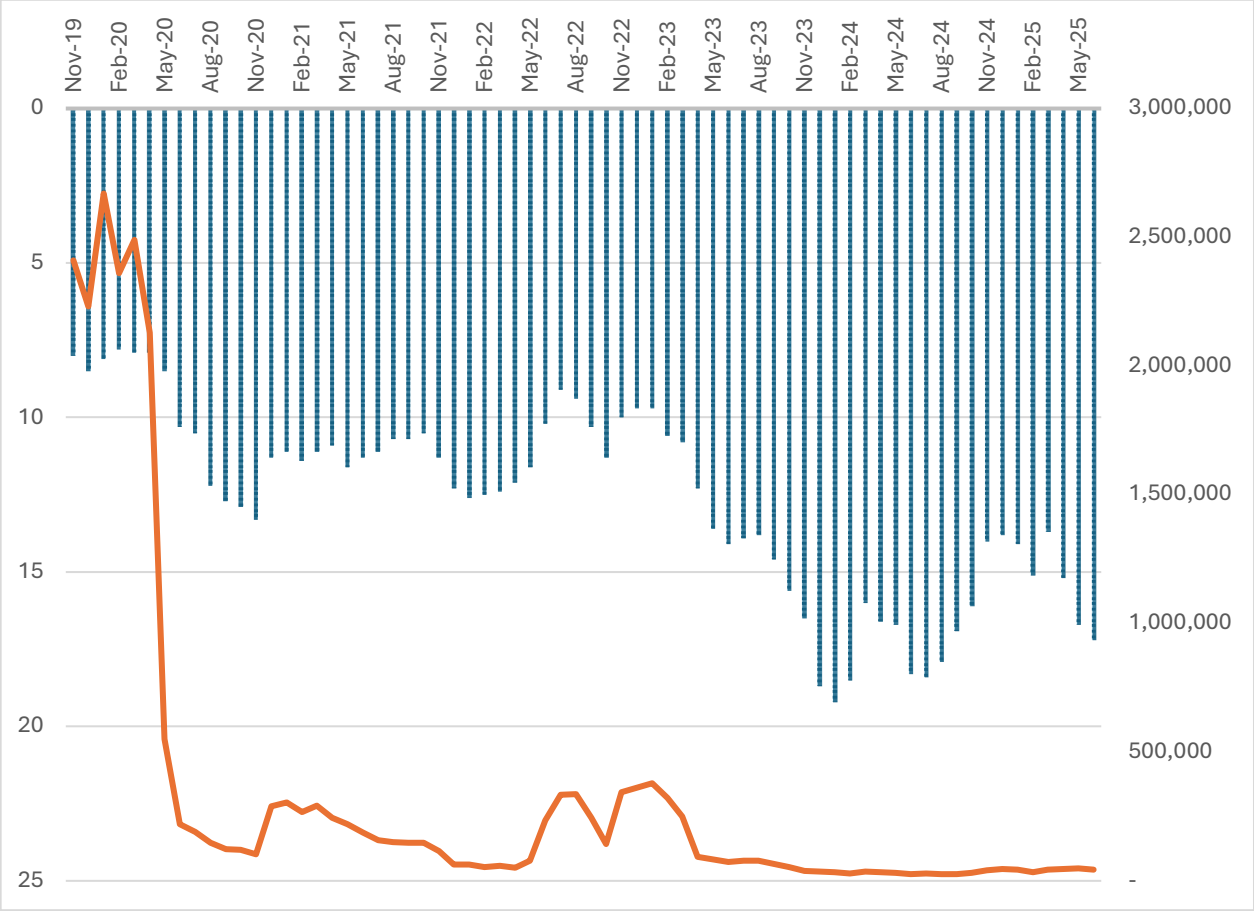
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active interference from anti-abortion organizations trying to replace health information with political messaging. Given WoW's notoriety and popularity as a resource, if someone is searching for information about having an abortion, we expect Women on the Web to appear as a top result along with other trusted national health providers. Interference often skews the search results in ways that downgrade or bury trusted providers.

Google may matter to WoW, but the inverse does not seem to be true. Several times a year, Google updates the main algorithms responsible for curating the top results for any Google search. While such a process should be focused on ensuring trusted sources appear at the top of the page, WoW's website often loses its rank after Core updates. Over the past six years, the organization has had to rapidly adapt to Google's changing search ranking algorithm. Algorithm updates are often unannounced and little information is offered when an essential service is impacted so dramatically, such as in the case of WoW's website losing visibility. These changes have meant that fewer people are referred to WoW through Google. In the following sections, we describe the struggles of the organization in the face of these changes, the first being the biggest in 2020.

Global Web Traffic and Google Search Updates

May 2020 was a wake-up call for the organization. A routine Google Core Update in May 2020 led to a dramatic decline in Google search referrals, seen in Figure 1.



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Figure 1. Women on Web's website clicks from January 2020 to May 2025. The orange trend line is the ranking in the search returns with lower being better (e.g. having a ranking of 1 puts the website at the top of the page whereas larger rankings appear on subsequent pages). The blue bars represent the number of clicks, or traffic from Google that WoW sibling sites received, demonstrating variable traffic and a slow recovery for clicks to the website.

The May 2020 Google Core Update devastated WoW traffic: the organization lost nearly 75% of its search traffic forcing it to invest understanding into what led to this steep decline. WoW immediately documented their website analytics and publicly criticized Google. Although Google responded to WoW directly over social media (Twitter), the company did not give any insight, nor did they follow up with changes to remedy the situation. They merely pointed to their search engine optimization (SEO) blog for tips on how to optimize the website.

The changes have had a lasting impact. Since January 2020, there have been 15 Google Core Updates, only three of which saw a positive change for WoW's website traffic (December 2020, May 2022, and March 2025), and four that resulted in a dramatic decline in search results of over 40% (May 2020, November 2021, September 2022, and March 2023).

Upon looking at such a dramatic loss in May 2020, it's not immediately clear what happened. Several factors may have contributed to the site's steep traffic decline. For one, Google's algorithm has become far more sophisticated. Google tightened rules on ads requiring them to be more targeted, and searches became personalized toward users' behavioural data (time spent on pages, websites clicked on, etc.) as opposed to simply the search words they used.

The fateful May 2020 Core Update was at the beginning of the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since little was known about the virus, Google relied on and prioritized information from hospitals and state-mandated health sites. This meant any traffic that was related to pharmaceuticals – for example, searches specifically for abortion pills, such as mifepristone and/or misoprostol – was lost, as Google no longer ranked WoW's website as a relevant option.

Since WoW functions internationally and care seekers access different language versions of its website, another contributing factor could be translation errors.[10] Websites containing multiple grammatic inconsistencies due to translation errors can be flagged as untrustworthy, reinforcing a biased toward the visibility of the Anglophone internet.

Traffic dropped and WoW appeared in less organic discovery searches for organizations providing abortion services, meaning searches that are not influenced by ads or paid content. Searches on Google that named 'Women on Web' outright did not decrease significantly during this period, but traffic to WoW dropped from generic searches like "abortion pill online" or "where to get a medical abortion." Other queries involving Cytotec (a common brand of misoprostol) also dropped as search terms delivering users to the WoW website. Normally, these searches act as a vital link between general knowledge and WoW's services, since information-seekers may not already be familiar with the organization. These searches also indicate that users are very intentionally seeking access to abortion services. Google's change meant that fewer users found WoW's

[10] "SEO fundamentals: Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content," Google Search Central, Google, effective December 10, 2025, https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/creating-helpful-content

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service when searching for general terms related to reproductive health and abortion, leaving them disconnected and with fewer options when seeking services they might have urgently needed. Since care seekers are frequently only searching for resources when they need them, the visibility of services like WoW's is especially important for these general queries.

The impacts of these algorithmic updates, particularly ones that result in a steep decline in rankings, ultimately mean that fewer individuals in restricted areas have access to timely and essential care. This was evidenced by the overall decline in consultations in the years after the first devastating Google Core Update, seen in Figure 2. The impacts were felt over a long period of time and took years to recover from, during a worldwide pandemic that saw even fewer resources available. Consultations from care seekers dropped for years after the initial update in May 2020, only recently rebounding over the last two years.

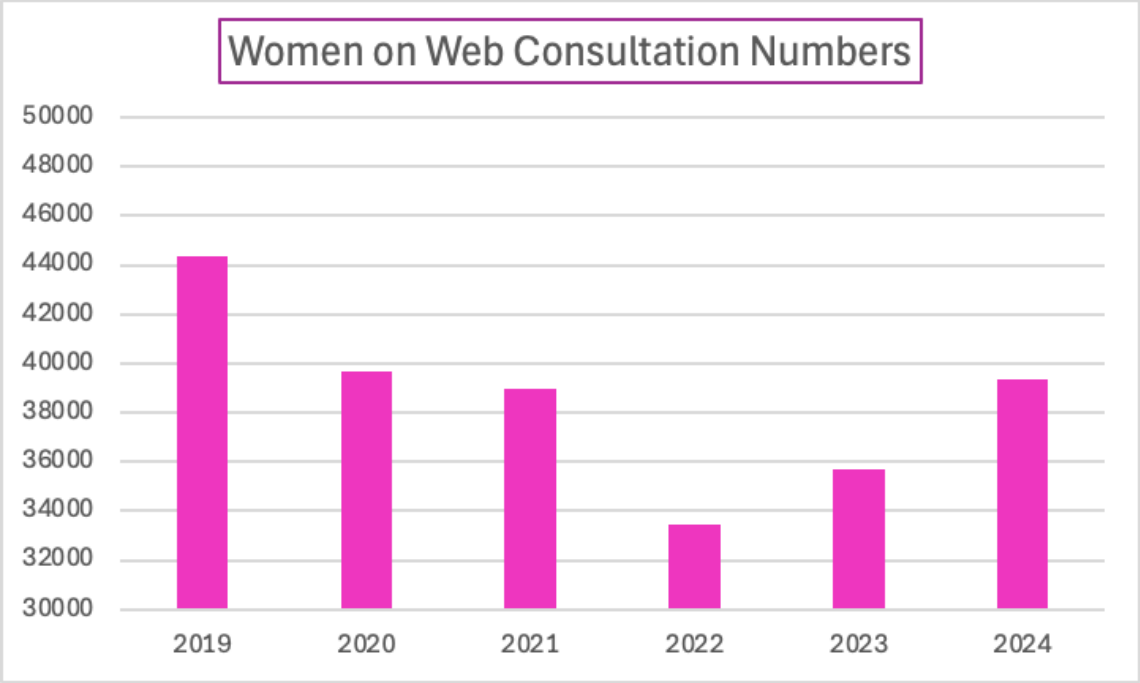


Figure 2. Women on Web's consultation numbers from January 2019 to December 2024.

While these issues speak to the global challenges facing WoW, the organization faces national challenges in its search engine visibility as well.

National Search Engine Referrals

Since 2019, WoW's main website has been blocked – meaning the site cannot be accessed by residents within the country due to state-regulated or independent internet providers – in Spain, South Korea, and Turkey. According to data at the time of writing, this main website is currently blocked or partially blocked in South Korea, Turkey, Spain, Iran, and more recently, the Philippines and Argentina. The censorship WoW faces has required strategizing ways to ensure that people who need abortion care services can access them, which include creating and maintaining the

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mirror/sibling sites and developing toolkits for users to circumvent censorship in their area. These local sites carry the same content and provisional access to lead care seekers to the same resources but with a different URL that defaults to the local language. WoW has mirror sites in Korean, Polish, Indonesian, Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, and Hungarian. This allows the organization to pop up new sites when existing ones are censored to create what they like to call a 'whack a mole' approach to circumventing blockages.

The sibling site strategy requires managing and optimizing several sites at once, as the sibling sites contribute to the organization's overall traffic. The sibling sites have been an effective tool in circumventing censorship for regions where WoW has faced partial or state-wide blockages. However, if one sibling site is blocked, it often takes time for the organization to regain that traffic through a new site. Examining sibling sites gives a deeper analysis of the dynamic traffic coming out of various regions.

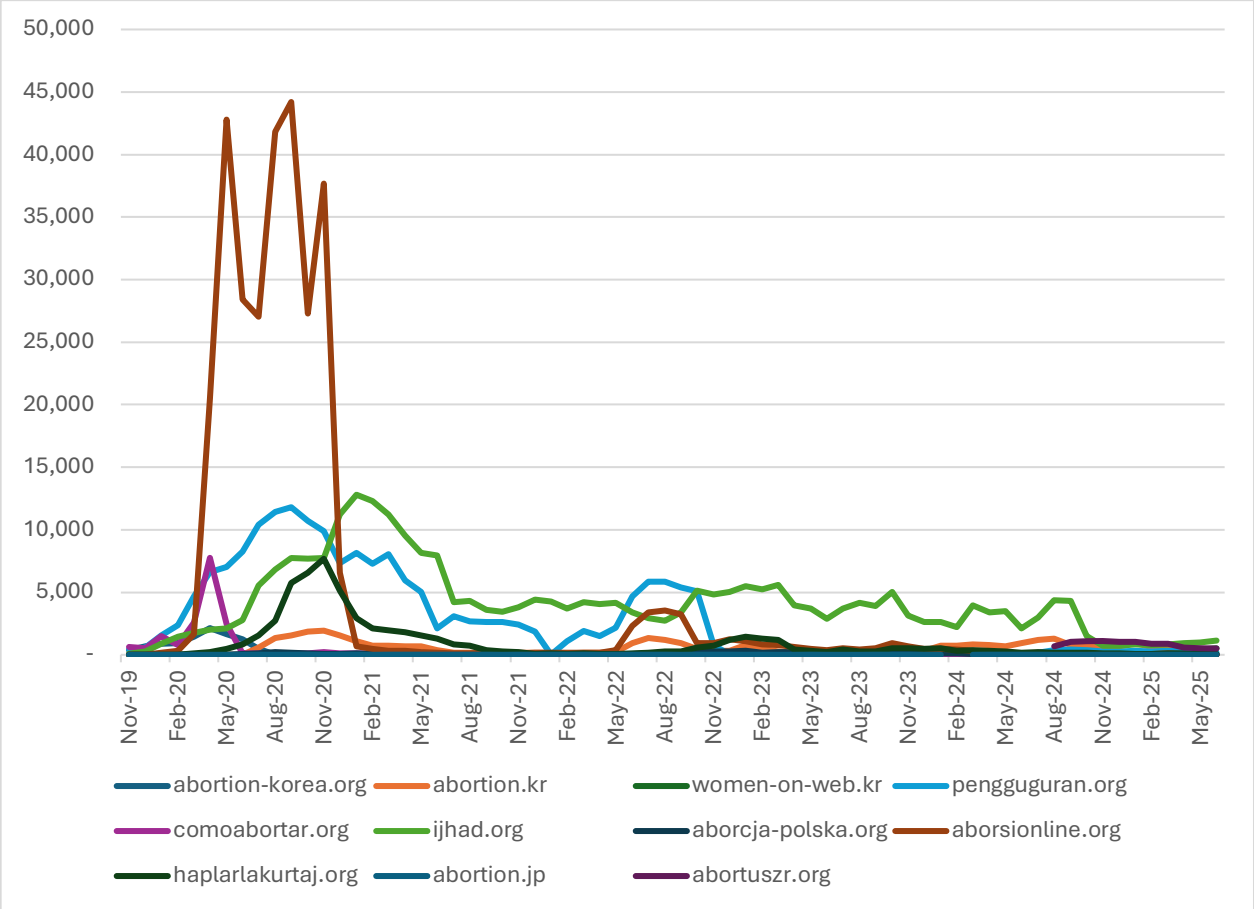


Figure 3. Clicks, or traffic from Google, over time for Women on Web's regional sibling sites.

Figure 3 shows the traffic to several of WoW's sibling sites between 2020-2025. Sites such as ijhad.org, functioning in Arabic-speaking countries, aborsionline.org in Indonesian, and pengguguran.org in Malay, had high rates of traffic throughout parts of this period. As depicted, the Indonesian sibling site had been one of WoW's strongest but collapsed after a Google Core Update in December 2020.

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Google's search algorithm again influences traffic to sibling sites. Figure 4 depicts the overall traffic to sibling sites, the orange line, and the average ranking for the site in Google returns, as inversed blue bars. As sibling sites decline in the Google's ranking (and the blue parts fall lower on the graph, the orange overall impressions drop.

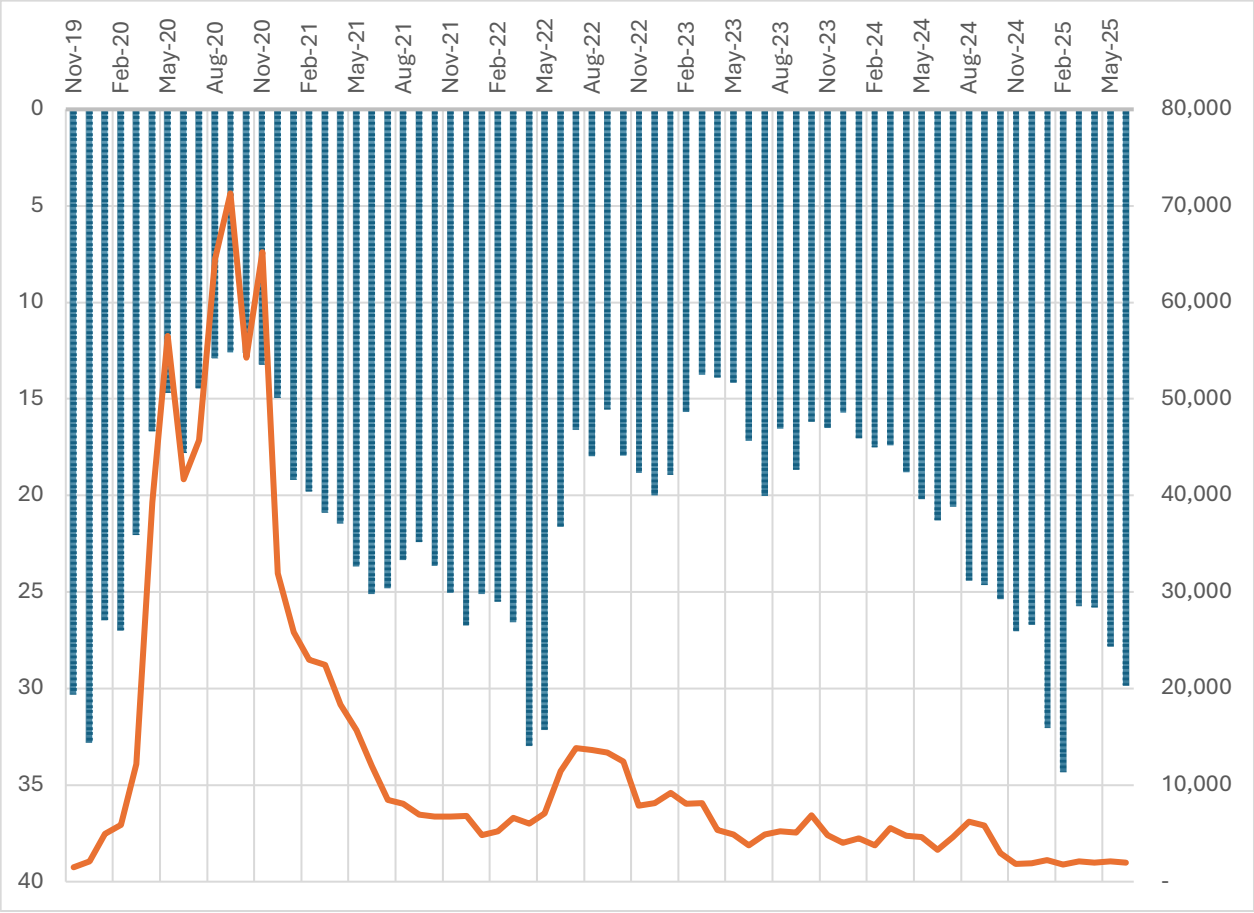


Figure 4. Women on Web's sibling site search engine results page from January 2020 to May 2025. The orange trend line is the ranking in the search returns with lower being better (i.e. lower rankings appear first in the search results).. The blue bars represent the number of clicks, or traffic from search engines, that WoW affiliate sites received.

In the following sections, we examine two contexts, South Korea and Poland, which are demonstrate the complicated relationship between WoW's work online, Google's search ranking, and regional reproductive rights climates. By not allowing access to accurate health information, these regions are in violation of United Nations' standards that recognize access to healthcare as a human right, which includes reproductive health and abortion access.

South Korea

Women on Web's relationship with South Korea has experienced several ebbs and flows over the years. WoW first realized its main website was censored within the country in February 2019,

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though an Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) report[11] later revealed the site may have been blocked as early as August 2018. This information was triangulated in compiling the timeline in Figure 5, which also shows WoW's responses to this censorship.

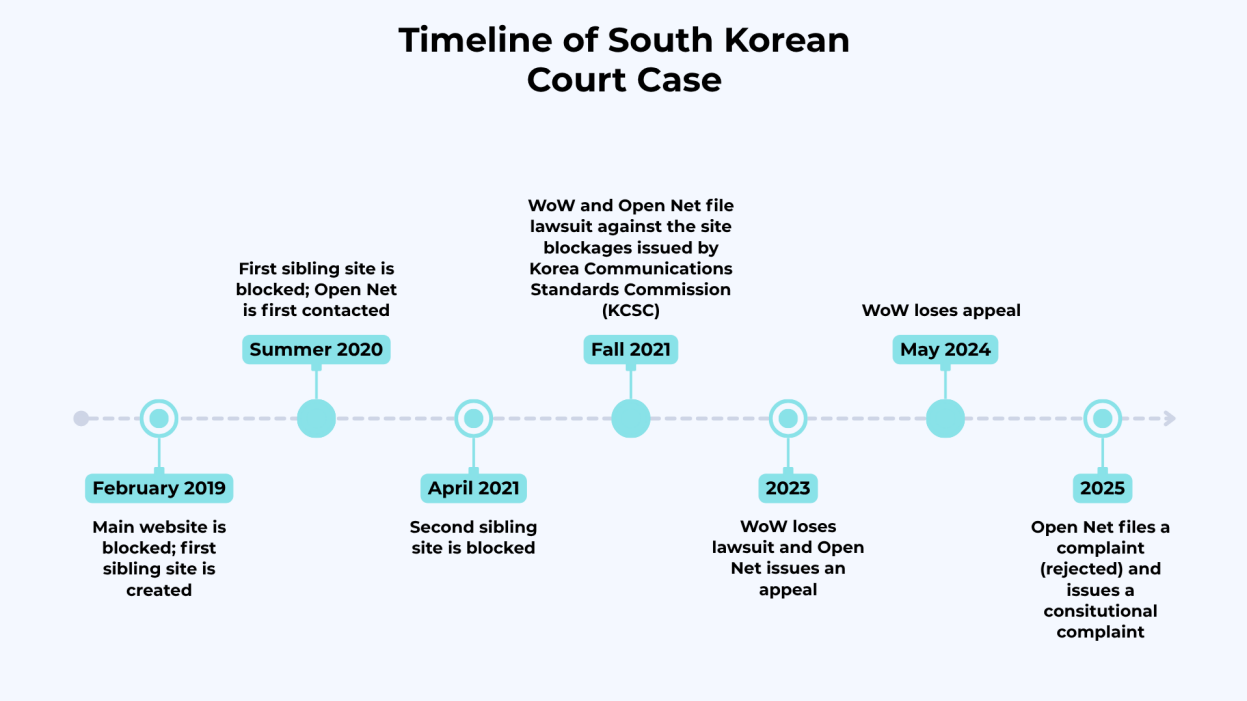


Figure 5. Women on Web's South Korean court case timeline.

WoW developed a sibling site in response to the blockage, but this site was also censored in May 2020. A second sibling site was set up in April 2021, which was then blocked in December 2021. A third sibling site was blocked in February 2025, and WoW is currently operating its fourth sibling site.

WoW made the decision to pursue legal action in 2021 and partnered with Open Net Korea, a non-profit organization that advocates for free and open access to the internet in Korea. The lawsuit was eventually lost in late 2023; an appeal was filed in 2024, which also resulted in a loss. Open Net responded with a constitutional complaint on behalf of WoW, the results of which the organization continues to wait on. South Korea's Constitutional Court overturned the country's

[11] "OONI Measurement Aggregation Toolkit (MAT): Web connectivity test, www.womenonweb.org," OONI Explorer, accessed October 17, 2025, https://explorer.ooni.org/chart/mat?test_name=web_connectivity&axis_x=measurement_start_day&since=2018-01-01&until=2019-04-30&time_grain=day&probe_cc=KR&domain=www.womenonweb.org&axis_y=probe_cc

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abortion ban in 2019, and abortion was officially decriminalized in 2021,[12] illuminating the gap between legal and actual access as care seekers continue to face multiple barriers. This gap is again made visible by the conflict between South Korea's decriminalized abortion laws and the country's pharmaceutical laws, which were cited by the Korean Communications Standards Commission (KCSC) as the official reason for the blockage, claiming WoW's website was in violation of South Korea's Pharmaceutical Affairs Act.[13] If a state's pharmaceutical laws can supersede access to essential healthcare, amendments should be made to align the two pieces of legislation.

Poland

In October 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal voted to ban abortions in cases of fetal malformations, implementing a near-total ban on abortion access in the country.[14] This decision brought massive protests and activist resistance, which has created volatility for care seekers. As reported in WoW's Social Media Report,[15] WoW's Polish social media accounts, including several Facebook and Instagram pages, were blocked in 2020 around the same time that protestors were rallying against the country's decision to effectively ban abortion access.

WoW's SEO team demonstrated an increase in the organization's Polish search traffic around the same time in 2020. This may have been related to several possible factors, such as an awareness that abortion restrictions would potentially impact access to services, a need or interest in more information about abortion generally, and/or interest in the political shifts being experienced by care seekers. Instances of suppression and censorship such as WoW's experiences on social media at the time, did not stop people from searching for health information nor did it prevent other intermediaries from responding to this need. Instead, scam websites filled the void. In 2021, Women on Web found the website, poronne.org, had copied and pasted WoW's site content and was masquerading as WoW without the organization's consent. Since the scam site was evaluated by Google's algorithm as more "optimized," it outranked WoW in the Google rankings. As such, Google was implicated in directing users to a site where they may receive misinformation or be taken advantage of, with scammers standing to benefit from clients under the impression they are donating to WoW, all while diverting traffic from a trusted provider.

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[12] See Footnote 5.

[13] "Standing in solidarity with the women and people of South Korea as the government denies sexual and reproductive health rights". News and Updates, Women on Web, May 16, 2024, https://www.womenonweb.org/en/news/standing-in-solidarity-with-the-women-and-people-of-south-korea-as-the-government-denies-sexual-and-reproductive-health-rights/

[14] See Footnote 7.

[15] Erin Hassard, Fenwick McKelvey and Stefanie Duguay, "Pills, Clicks and Bans: Auditing Platformed Censorship of Access to Abortion and Reproductive Rights," *Digital Intimacy, Gender, and Sexuality Lab* (2026): Concordia University. Montréal, Quebec.

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Conclusions

Observing the complex web of WoW's traffic and censorship data, one begins to get a sense of the difficulty the organization faces, not only in piecing together all its own data to develop a global online strategy, but to maintain pressure on "Big Tech" and states alike to protect reproductive rights. Each region comes with its own set of challenges, from website banning to search suppression, making the effort to provide sexual and reproductive health information to those who need it precarious, tenuous, and costly. Like most site analytics, data is only available for finite amounts of time, so record keeping of anomalies is essential for future review. If analytic systems are replaced or become obsolete, as Google's did in 2023, any retroactive insight depends on an organization's ability to document traffic trends and anomalies. This analysis only reviewed the sites' analytics and did not include social media accounts, LLMs, or other AI-powered search and information sources. Only through WoW's active institutional memory and investment in search engine analytics has this report been possible to create.

Understanding what analytics represent can be mystifying and expensive. It is vital to a non-profit organization like WoW, which is subject to censorship and political contention, to expertly analyze data to identify significant trends and develop impactful strategies to continue providing services associated with human rights. This analysis can be cost-prohibitive and ultimately the imperative toward SEO and negotiating the commercial search landscape places exceedingly more value on software knowledge than the services being searched. While companies such as Google provide some insight into how to optimize a website (Google provides strategies based on the EEAT model: Experience, Expertise, Authority, and Trustworthiness[16]), the criteria are easily manipulated. This manipulation is evidenced by nefarious websites, such as crisis pregnancy centers (CPC), which imitate the language of legitimate services to dissuade abortion seekers from getting care. It is also unclear how Google evaluates these criteria and what biases may be present in the search engine's algorithmic curation, as it has a track record of embedding racial and gendered biases that impede information delivery.[17]

From various factors impacting web traffic to regional censorship and political contexts, organizations are now required to allocate a huge volume of resources to assessing how search engines and other online intermediaries impact the visibility and accessibility of their services. In 2021, after the impacts of the Google Core Update became clear, WoW's digital marketing and strategy expenses increased by 242% from 2020; that amount went up again by 42% in 2022 and again by 10% in 2023. As mentioned, from January 1, 2021, to December 2024, WoW allocated nearly $430,000 CAD to digital strategy development to ensure their visibility online. WoW has specialists and digital strategists they rely on to sustain the service online and without these resources, similar organizations may struggle to develop a clear assessment of their own digital ecosystems.

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[16] Criteria for Google's search rater guidelines: https://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/hsw-sqrg.pdf

[17] Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2018)

This analysis constitutes a form of "data feminism" because it mobilizes data as evidence that can be used to invoke action[18] and challenge inequal power structures. Prior to carrying out this work, WoW did not have a comprehensive body of evidence through which to understand fluctuations in its web traffic that were linked to variations in care-seekers' awareness of, and access to, the organization's services. Without evidence, Big Tech companies like Google can "victim blame" organizations as not doing enough to optimize their visibility or not adhering to guidelines so as to not incur penalty in the form of downranking. Similarly, without taking stock of shifts and differences between sibling sites in different regions, it is difficult to understand how legislative decisions and political movements affect abortion care providers and their clients. The evidence built through this report demonstrates that updates to Google's algorithmic ranking have a severe impact. It also shows that political conditions both intensify the need for WoW's services as well as the barriers for those seeking them, as they may encounter difficulty accessing sibling sites and instead be exposed to misinformation.

It is essential to use such evidence to hold powerful actors accountable. Their inaction to remedy the censorship and suppression of online abortion services ignores multiple disparities. These include the disparity between organizations like WoW that can afford to channel resources into digital visibility strategies and those that lack these resources, and therefore remain without evidence to demonstrate their case against censorship. More starkly, failure to remedy this situation ignores disparities between those who can access sexual and reproductive health services and those who cannot, who are often facing multiple and intersecting barriers to obtaining care (e.g. poverty and a lack of health insurance coverage, gender-based violence, discrimination from medical providers, etc.).[19][20][21] Therefore, corporate obliviousness – or perhaps, callousness – to the possible damage to essential organizations and services trying to strategize around evaluative measures that are ultimately designed for business websites or mainstream organizations, is a key block for care seekers in accessing the services they need. By limiting the visibility of essential reproductive health services that ensure the fulfillment of reproductive rights, Big Tech companies, such as Google, play a role in the harm experienced by people living in countries and circumstances in which their rights are denied.

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[18] Catherine D'Ignazio & Lauren F. Klein, *Data feminism* (The MIT Press,2020)

[19] Jocelyn Downie & Carla Nassar, "Barriers to access to abortion through a legal lens," *Health*

LJ, *15* (2007): 143.

[20] David Cohen & Carole Joffe, *Obstacle course: the everyday struggle to get an abortion in America*. (University of California Press, 2020)

[21] "Trends in barriers to abortion care," Action Canada, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.actioncanadashr.org/resources/reports-analysis/2022-12-14-trends-barriers-abortion-care

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Recommendations

Search engines need to better support civil society organizations in search engine optimization.

Organizations such as WoW need access to SEO specialists and strategists who can help make sense of their site data, as they face multiple barriers in reaching care seekers in need of their services. Therefore, potentially more subsidized SEO strategists for essential services such as WoW, either provided by states or Big Tech infrastructures.

Search engines, and massive information platforms more broadly, need to be more responsive to civil society appeals.

As the dominant search engine provider and a massive information platform company, spanning video (YouTube) and AI services (Gemini), Google should be obligated to respond to the requests and needs of civil society organizations. Platforms like Google are large enough that they serve as major information infrastructures for society,[22] which means that they have a duty of care to dedicate resources toward the safety, well-being, rights, and autonomy of the people who they serve. Google and similar tech companies should dedicate greater resources toward responding to organizations' appeals and requests for help and should do everything possible to remedy an issue when presented with evidence of the search engine's impacts.

Better transparency in core updates on health information.

States and companies' alike need to be held to account for actions taken to limit their constituents'/users' access to essential healthcare and information. More safeguards are needed for ensuring access to vital and time sensitive services. Information needs to be made available regardless of socio-economic status, internet access, or region. While it seems that Google unintentionally downranked WoW, their unawareness ultimately reduced access to abortion information and care globally.

Civil society organizations need to stick together in the fight against digital suppression.

Knowledge sharing practices, such as sharing resources, databases, and toolkits among fellow organizations or communities, are encouraged to provide mutual care for services struggling to find adequate funding. By joining efforts, organizations can share expertise or combine datasets as evidence for holding Big Tech accountable. They can come together in forms of collective witnessing[23] that make it difficult for technology companies to look away from the harms in which they are implicated. Women on Web is doing this kind of movement-building work, such as through their Digital Rights Program that expands cross-movement partnerships.

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[22] Tarletan Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet : platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*, (Yale University Press, 2018)

[23] Carrie Rentschler, "Media witnessing and the feminist labors of making survivors believable," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 12*, no.3 (2022): 916–924

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