

How to Engage Survivors and Communities Impacted by Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting:

A Toolkit for Creating Engagement



Disclaimer

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Welcome to the Survivor and Community Engagement Toolkit!

Why This Toolkit?

The Survivor and Community Engagement Toolkit is intended for organizations and individuals who are working on prevention efforts to end female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C)¹ and building support services for survivors.²

Understanding the diversity and sensitivity surrounding FGM/C,² this toolkit aims to provide guidance on best practices for outreach to FGM/C-impacted communities. Throughout 2023–2024, we gathered insights, strategies, and real-life examples from community-based organizations in the United States that are engaging in this work to assist and support future initiatives around FGM/C prevention, education, and support.

What's Inside This Toolkit?

The toolkit is divided into four sections. Click the boxes below to go directly to a section.

Survivor and Community Engagement—An Overview:

Gain a holistic understanding of community and survivor engagement. Review why it is important and how it makes a difference.

Ethical and Cultural Considerations:

Learn how to approach FGM/C with respect and cultural sensitivity. This section provides guidance to ensure mindful interactions.

Strategies to Conduct Survivor and Community Engagement:

Discover different methods to connect with and support individuals and communities impacted by FGM/C. Review case studies in which organizations share their experiences with community engagement and lessons learned.

Decision Making in Program and Event Planning:

Understand that every community is unique. Learn ways to adapt various forms of engagement to suit the specific needs and contexts of each community.

¹ Numerous terms are used to describe the practice, such as mutilation, cutting, and circumcising. The term female genital mutilation emphasizes the harmfulness of the practice. The term female genital cutting more neutrally describes the practice itself. Terms also vary in different regions, languages and cultures. Some of these terms are stigmatized and taboo. For the purpose of this toolkit, we use the combined term FGM/C to honor and acknowledge the range of perspectives about the practice.

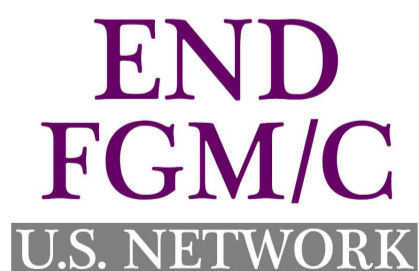
² We acknowledge that not all survivors of FGM/C identify as female. However, for the purposes of this toolkit, we use gendered language for descriptive purposes and to align with most available data, which focuses on women and girls. We strive to be inclusive and respectful of all identities.

This toolkit was designed to align with common adult learning processes. By organizing the toolkit into specific sections, we provide a systematic approach to addressing the complex issues surrounding FGM/C. Although there may be some overlap between sections, each one builds on the previous, offering a comprehensive understanding of community and survivor engagement.

Who Contributed?

This toolkit is a collaborative effort, drawing on insights from individuals affiliated with organizations working in the field of FGM/C. Their experiences provide valuable perspectives on addressing FGM/C across the United States. Insights are gleaned from the following organizations:

Click on the logos below to learn more about our contributors.



Survivor and Community Engagement—An Overview

Why Engagement Matters

In the movement to end FGM/C and support those impacted, engagement is key to progress.

But what does that mean?

Engagement is about actively connecting with and fostering understanding among a diverse group of individuals. This group includes those who have experienced FGM/C, their families and friends, and people who have not been directly impacted by FGM/C.

Engagement is about bringing everyone into the conversation—men, adolescents, and community leaders such as elders, religious figures, teachers, and local officials.

Why?

Because **every voice and every ally can play an important role in driving change** and preventing future generations from continuing FGM/C.

“Community and survivor engagement isn’t so much a deliverable as just a part of the fabric of our work.”

- Katharine Conroy, Sauti Yetu



Building a Movement Together

A crucial part of building a movement to end FGM/C involves recognizing that we are working to change a harmful social norm that may exist within our own communities.



What is a social norm?

Social norms refer to behaviors or actions within a social group that are regarded as socially acceptable or appropriate. These “unwritten rules” guide how members of the community act and interact. Breaking these norms can lead to social consequences, such as ostracism or criticism.³

In communities where FGM/C is practiced, it is often justified based on tradition, cultural significance, religious beliefs, and the reinforcement of societal gender roles. There are themes of patriarchal expectations and societal pressures for women to act in certain ways, such as the expectation for women to be “virtuous” or to avoid promiscuity. Other justifications may include misconceptions about health or hygiene, preserving one’s identity, enhancing marriage prospects, and other culturally specific reasons.

To challenge a norm that has significant social importance, social norm theory suggests building a critical mass of voices speaking up against it. Survivors from FGM/C-practicing communities, including those within the United States and among second, third, and subsequent generations, face challenges around voicing their perspectives. They often encounter a society where understanding of FGM/C is not well integrated into mental health, gender-based violence (GBV), social, judicial, medical, criminal, and healing support services. As a result, they may lack appropriate support structures to address the impact of FGM/C, leading to negative consequences.

Therefore, community engagement must not only include communities impacted by FGM/C, but also include educating and garnering support from individuals and communities unfamiliar with FGM/C to address assumptions or misconceptions that might negatively impact interactions with potential survivors or those at risk of FGM/C. The ultimate goal is to implement interventions for behavior change, aimed at stopping the practice and changing how communities think and feel about FGM/C. ***In other words, community engagement should be about shifting attitudes and perspectives while recognizing the cultural complexity of issues like FGM/C.*** Research indicates that if 25% of a community abandons a harmful social norm, the rest are likely to follow.⁴

Through mobilizing voices from diverse backgrounds and fostering open dialogue, we can reshape the narrative surrounding FGM/C, empowering individuals to become catalysts for change and nurturing a sense of agency within our communities.

³ UNICEF. (2022). *Dynamic of social norms: Female genital mutilation*. <https://www.unicef.org/media/124446/file/FGM-Dynamics-Social-Norm-2022.pdf>

⁴ Centola, D., Becker, J., Brackbill, D., & Baronchelli, A. (2018). *Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention*. *Science*, 360, 1116–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aas8827>



“We want to also effect a change in behavior. So it’s why we try to engage the community. Because if they are not aware of the effects of this whole issue that we are talking about and they don’t know that you can have a complication that is relating to this [FGM/C] and they will not know. So if we do our work to engage them, hand out the flyers to [advertise] Zoom meetings, trainings, we wanna hope that they will change, a behavioral change.”

- Nettie Johnson, ACANA

The Role of Survivor and Community Engagement

Community engagement is a dynamic effort where each aspect can contribute to a broader and more widespread impact. From providing resources and professional referrals to fostering open conversations about FGM/C, every element plays a crucial role in prevention and support.

These efforts can pave the way for long-term changes in social norms, improved mental health, patient and policy advocacy, and the development of leadership and mentorship among those with lived experiences, helping them to support and guide fellow community members.

Positive Impacts of Engagement

Empowerment Through Resources

By connecting individuals with vital services, support networks, and learning opportunities, we equip them with the skills to address challenges posed by FGM/C. This awareness empowers individuals and communities to make informed decisions about their overall well-being.

Solidarity

Creating spaces where survivors can share their stories fosters solidarity, breaking the sense of isolation reported by some survivors, and deepens the understanding of FGM/C's varied impacts. Personal experiences are essential for developing culturally sensitive support services.

Open Conversations

Encouraging dialogue can play a significant role in breaking down the barriers of shame and stigma related to FGM/C. These conversations can ensure a sense of support for individuals directly impacted by FGM/C and cultivate empathy and understanding among those who have not been directly impacted.

Creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and learning fosters a sense of ownership and involvement among community members, including survivors and others not directly impacted by FGM/C. This collective understanding and support encourage individuals to take meaningful action and become advocates for change within their own communities.

Shifting Social Norms

Engagement can lead to significant shifts in social norms around FGM/C over time. Initiatives like intergenerational dialogue (e.g., between grandmothers and granddaughters) or mentorship programs can challenge deeply rooted beliefs and foster a more informed outlook within the community.

Potential Challenges of Engagement

Despite these benefits, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges that exist. Recognizing potential challenges can help you to develop stronger and more inclusive strategies that maximize the benefits of engagement while minimizing potential risks.

Resistance and Stigma

Encouragement of open dialogue may be met with resistance from those who uphold traditional beliefs about the need to continue FGM/C; this can perpetuate stigma and make it difficult to engage effectively with certain segments of the community, including those whom FGM/C may not directly impact but who still hold misconceptions or biases about FGM/C.

Retraumatization

Sharing personal experiences can be empowering but may also be triggering and induce trauma, including for those impacted by other forms of GBV. Ensure safe, supportive environments and have measures in place to respond appropriately if retraumatization occurs.

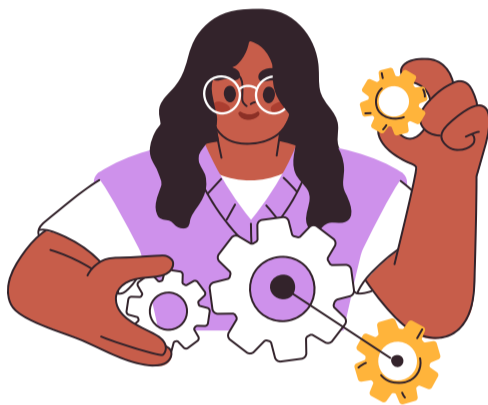
Cultural Misunderstandings

Engaging with diverse communities requires making an effort to understand their cultural norms and values. Lack of cultural awareness can unintentionally cause harm or reinforce negative perceptions, which can undermine the effectiveness of engagement efforts and reduce space for building shared understanding.

Power Dynamics

Power imbalances within communities, such as older women dominating younger women or men having more influence over women, can result in unequal participation or representation in community engagement efforts. It is essential to address these dynamics to ensure that all voices

Engaging Service Providers



Although this toolkit largely focuses on engaging individuals impacted by FGM/C and their surrounding community, considering how to connect with those who provide care and services to these communities can also be considered a form of community engagement.

We encourage you to connect to the healthcare providers, educators, social workers, and other service providers integrated in the daily lives of the individuals with whom you work. Collaborating with providers not only creates the opportunity to gain insight into the challenges faced by FGM/C-impacted communities, but also identifies gaps in services where professional training may improve the quality of care and support. Building a supportive network around the issue can lead to a more inclusive and empathetic approach when addressing FGM/C within your community.

A list of resources for service providers is available in the [Resources](#) section.

Continuous Improvement in Engagement

As you adapt and refine your engagement strategies, remember that this is an evolving process shaped by the changing needs of survivors and the community. Along the way, you will learn and notice areas where your engagement efforts might need to be adapted or improved, as it is not a perfect or linear process. The composition of your community may change over time, and new approaches may reveal themselves. By embracing a human-centered approach, you open yourself to the benefits and challenges of this work. Rather than avoiding the challenges, addressing them directly will strengthen the bond between your organization and the community, ensuring more effective and meaningful engagement.



Voices From the Field

In our conversations with advocates working to address FGM/C, one clear theme emerged: the essential role of community involvement in their organization's efforts.

“Community is the crux of our work. We’re here to serve, to learn from, and to reinvest into—just pour into our community. We have to be engaged with folks and understand, you know, kind of what’s going on in their lives to be able to do our work.”

-Dianna Uwayo, AFAHO

“Community engagement is what we thrive on. It’s how we do most of our work. In fact, all of our work, because it links us to the community, and then it makes us add a human push to our work instead of just looking at things on paper.”

-Nettie Johnson, ACANA

“Engaging the community will facilitate preventing FGM/C further and providing the resources and the services that this population deserves. So it will provide more awareness, more resources, more education about the subject—the consequences. So it is important to me and to the community.”

-Fardus Ahmed, iSAFE

Ethical and Cultural Considerations

Why is it Important?

When addressing the sensitive and complex issue of FGM/C, understanding and integrating ethical and cultural considerations is not just important—it is essential. FGM/C is often deeply rooted in cultural traditions, making it a delicate matter to address within communities.

A Trauma-Informed Approach



A trauma-informed approach recognizes that FGM/C is not only a physical violation but an experience that involves cultural identity, personal trauma, and community dynamics. Being trauma informed means understanding the cultural and ethical nuances of FGM/C and acknowledging the diverse experiences of survivors, including the varied emotional and psychological impacts.

This approach is crucial for survivors and community members connected to the issue through cultural, familial, or social ties. Insensitive interactions and negative experiences with service organizations can significantly impact their outlook and willingness to engage. By prioritizing a trauma-informed approach, we create a foundation of trust and safety, essential for effective and compassionate engagement.



“I think the purpose of every program is for the community to be hopefully self-sufficient at the end of the service with our programs. ***We’re creating opportunities for our clients to become cultural brokers into their communities where they are out there talking about FGMC and helping different women from their community just like speak up or seek services.***

So creating those opportunities where we find influential women in their communities, whether it’s like the Eritrean community or the Sudanese community, locating those two or three women who have a voice, who are very engaged about the topic, to go in there and just keep talking about FGMC and helping other women get to the services that they need.”

- Hana Abdelbaki, US Together



Guiding Principles

Engage Trusted Community Members

Collaborate with individuals who possess an intimate understanding of the impacted communities, demonstrating cultural competency and the skills to engage locally. These individuals, including survivors or those with close ties to the community, can foster trust and encourage active participation through their presence at events.

Foster Mindful Interactions

Engage survivors and community members empathetically and respectfully. Recognize the diverse range of experiences among survivors, acknowledging that some may identify as LGBTQ+ or may have experienced other forms of GBV. When interacting with other community members, such as men, adolescents, and elders, strive for inclusive communication that respects different perspectives and roles within the community.

Prioritize Self-Identified Needs

Empower survivors by placing them at the forefront of the engagement process. Respect their unique needs and preferences, allowing them to guide the conversation and the support they receive. If they are not ready to engage, do not pressure them, but let them know their needs will be prioritized whenever they are ready.

Validate and Affirm Clients' Experiences

Acknowledge and believe in the experiences shared by clients, because this is fundamental to building a trusting therapeutic relationship. By affirming their lived experiences, you create a space where clients feel empowered to engage more fully in their own recovery journey and open to communicating their needs.

Provide Responsive Resources

Offer culturally appropriate and accessible resources and referrals (e.g., medical, psychological, and legal). Be mindful of factors such as language barriers and cultural or a client's personal preferences, such as the preferred gender of service providers, which may impact one's comfort and sense of security. Collaborate locally to identify and tailor resources to meet specific needs.

Maintain Confidentiality

Uphold strict confidentiality in all interactions to safeguard individual privacy and ensure client safety. Respect how and when stories and experiences are shared, and consider the privacy level of places where conversations are held. These steps build trust and create a secure environment to participate in engagement efforts.

Create Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Foster environments where survivors and community members feel valued, respected, and safe to share their experiences and perspectives. Ensure these spaces are welcoming to all, regardless of age, background, identity (sexuality, religion, ability, etc.), or experience with FGM/C.

Encourage Community Connection and Support

Facilitate opportunities for survivors to connect with each other, enhancing mutual understanding and support. Similarly, engage the broader community, encouraging dialogue and connection among different groups to build a supportive network.

Promote Cultural Sensitivity

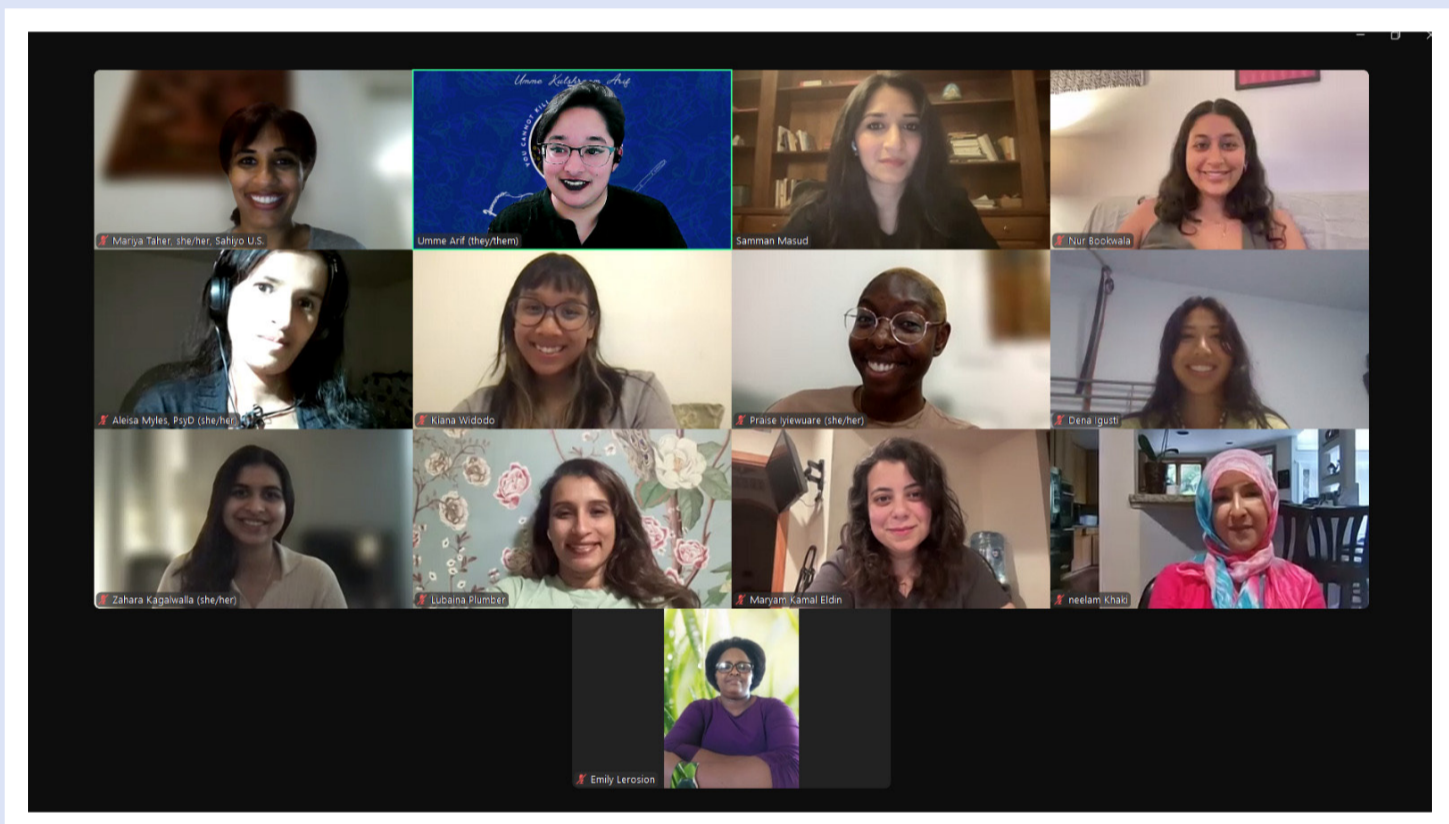
Recognize the complex interplay between cultural dynamics and individual identities. Be mindful of diverse cultural contexts and how norms, traditions, and personal backgrounds influence perceptions and responses to FGM/C.



Voices From the Field

“Engaging the community around FGC is more than just FGC. It’s holistic well-being, I would say, and providing folks an opportunity to gather together.”

-Dianna Uwayo, AFAHO



“Community engagement means having ongoing conversations with the folks who are most affected by the practice, as well as those who want to be talking about the practice and working in this space. It means ensuring that we are trauma-informed and culturally attuned, so that as we’re having those conversations, as we’re doing that active listening, we are again not applying our own preconceptions.”

-Katharine Conroy, Sauti Yetu



“This long period of time where we touch the families for extended periods of time helps us gain trust in these communities, and people just walk in to us for services all the time.”

-Hana Abdelbaki, US Together

Click below to view a clip from a webinar delivered by Wonder Guannu to hear successes and lessons learned from ACANA.

The image is a thumbnail for a webinar clip. It features a light brown background with a map of Africa. At the top left is the logo for 'sahiyo' (United Against Female Genital Cutting). At the top right is the logo for 'RTI INTERNATIONAL'. The main title is 'Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C'. Below the title is a portrait of Wonder Guannu, a woman wearing a colorful headwrap and a blue beaded top. To the right of her portrait is a large red play button icon. Below the play button is her name 'Wonder Guannu' and her title 'Project Coordinator'. At the bottom right is the logo for 'ACANA' (AFRICAN CULTURAL ALLIANCE OF NORTH AMERICA).

You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

Strategies to Conduct Survivor and Community Engagement

Engaging communities and survivors in conversations and efforts to end FGM/C requires a multifaceted and thoughtful approach. This section outlines five main categories of strategic approaches to survivor and community engagement that draw upon examples from various organizations and their programming initiatives. It is important to note that the examples highlighted are not exhaustive, and many examples can fall under different categories.

If accessing electronically, click on the strategy below to jump to that section.



Overview of Strategies

1. Building Interest

Involves using an open and exploratory approach to conversations to encourage individuals to engage in conversation about FGM/C, whether or not they are survivors. [Click the text boxes below to access case study examples and resources about this strategy.](#)

Tapping into Interests

By using familiar communication methods and terminology to start conversations and recruit participants, organizations have found success in connecting the issue of FGM/C with personal interests. This approach helps to engage individuals who might otherwise be reluctant to discuss the topic.

Word of Mouth

For many organizations, generating interest in available opportunities and resources through word of mouth has proven to be highly effective.

2. Relationship Building

Focuses on establishing credibility and trust within communities through partnering with trusted entities, showing solidarity through storytelling, and ensuring the longevity of programs. [Click the text boxes below to access case study examples and resources about this strategy.](#)

Credible Messengers

Community buy-in from key stakeholders can guide your way to finding individuals who can serve as credible messengers. This strategy has proven particularly effective for organizations attempting to engage overlooked demographics.

Sharing Stories

Sharing personal stories makes the issue of FGM/C more relatable and accessible, showcasing the resilience of survivors and the complexity of their experiences. These narratives foster deeper community trust and engagement by highlighting paths toward healing and advocacy.

Longevity of Engagement

Sustained engagement over time demonstrates an organization's dedication and reliability, reinforcing its commitment to supporting the community.

3. Accessibility

Ensures that information, support, and events related to FGM/C are easily reachable to **all segments of the community**, regardless of language, physical or technical limitations, or sociocultural barriers. *Click the text boxes below to access case study examples and resources about this strategy.*

Creating Accessible Spaces

Service delivery has a dynamic nature and involves proactively developing responsive strategies that are accessible to meet the diverse needs of individuals and the broader community.

Language as a Facilitator

Acknowledging the linguistic diversity within communities underscores the need for language accessibility and tailoring outreach to reflect varying cultural attitudes.

4. Event Methodology

Involves creating interactive and receptive programs with content tailored to the nature of an organization's efforts around FGM/C and identifying ways to use technology to enhance engagement. [Click the text boxes below to access case study examples and resources about this strategy.](#)

Aim of Efforts

How organizations tailor their approach to discussing FGM/C within their programming can significantly influence community engagement and attitude shifts over time.

Interactivity of Programs

It is important to create a space and engage survivors and community members in a way that is supportive and responsive to their needs, so individuals feel seen, heard, and motivated to effect change.

Technology Use for Engagement

Through targeted campaigns, informative posts, and shared survivor stories, organizations tap into the power of social media to reach a wider audience, engage with community members, and inspire action against FGM/C.

5. Safety and Well-Being

Centers around creating an empowering and nurturing environment for survivors and community members impacted by FGM/C, fostering their strength and resilience, as individuals and as a collective. [Click the text boxes below to access case study examples and resources about this strategy.](#)

Building Peer Support

The diverse experiences and challenges encountered by individuals affected by FGM/C require a platform for sharing and understanding these realities. Therefore, the path forward must be shaped by the insights and perspectives of those most intimately connected to the experience of FGM/C.

Survivor-Informed Program Design

Using a survivor-informed program design respects survivors' autonomy, acknowledges their diverse needs, and prioritizes their well-being throughout the engagement process.

Follow-Up Care

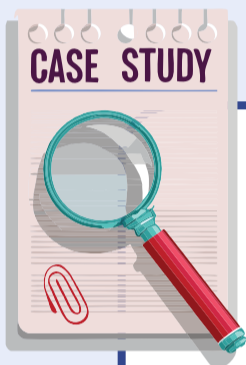
Ensuring that the support provided is not a one-time effort but a continuous process that adapts to the evolving needs of survivors and communities can strengthen the impact of initial engagement efforts.



1. Building Interest

Tapping into Interests

By using familiar communication methods and terminology to start conversations and recruit participants, organizations have found success in connecting the issue of FGM/C with personal interests. This approach helps to engage individuals who might otherwise be reluctant to discuss the topic.

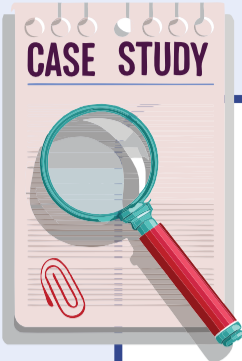


Nile Sisters Development Initiative (NSDI)

The Nile Sisters Development Initiative (NSDI) has found that active listening and finding [natural segues](#) into discussions about FGM/C in conversations about related topics like healthy relationships and body autonomy can pique interest in a nonintrusive manner. This approach helps women build trust with staff members before addressing the sensitive topic of FGM/C and navigating the trauma surrounding their experiences.

To further support participants in discussing sensitive issues, NSDI hosts Coffee Circles led by licensed marriage and family therapists. These circles provide a comforting space for individuals who may be interested in seeking individual counseling but are hesitant due to the clinical atmosphere and stigma associated with therapy. By offering therapy sessions in a less intimidating and more convenient way, NSDI aims to use Coffee Circles as a way to make therapy more accessible to the community.

The topics of conversation are flexible and based on the participants' most pressing needs. If a discussion naturally leads to FGM/C, the facilitator engages with the topic, ensuring it is approached sensitively and appropriately. The group setting of the Coffee Circles has led to individuals feeling empowered and in a position to advocate for FGM/C education and the prevention of harmful practices. NSDI has observed participants gaining confidence and taking on advocacy roles within their communities, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.



Nile Sisters Development Initiative (NSDI)

NSDI offers employment facilitation services to address their clients' primary needs, often centered on achieving financial self-sufficiency. To better understand each individual's background and assess their eligibility for vocational training programs, NSDI requires applicants to complete a screening tool. As part of this routine screening process, NSDI includes questions aimed at identifying whether an individual has experienced crime, with FGM/C listed as one of the options. This addition to the screening tool enables NSDI to identify individuals impacted by FGM/C and provides an entry point for discussing this sensitive topic during participation in vocational training programs.

This approach serves a dual purpose. First, it helps NSDI build rapport and trust with the individuals it serves. Second, by addressing other concerns such as mental and behavioral health needs and providing referrals to culturally competent and trauma-informed service providers, NSDI can dig deeper into its clients' specific needs related to FGM/C. Once primary concerns are addressed, clients can shift their focus to other areas of their lives, allowing NSDI to provide more targeted support for their recovery and empowerment.



“A step towards self-sufficiency. In the sense of being able to obtain things to help with mental and physical being, as well as economic stability, to ultimately led to individuals becoming the best versions of themselves and being successful.”

-Breanne Lash, NSDI

Click below to view a clip from a webinar delivered by Breanne Lash from NSDI to hear about when and how to provide information on resources.



You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

Word of Mouth

For many organizations, generating interest in available opportunities and resources through word of mouth has proven to be highly effective.



Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation (GWPF)

The Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation (GWPF) started its support group program in early 2016 in response to inquiries from women about various services, including financial, medical, and legal support. Initially, there was hesitation about how to recruit participants, because girls are often forced to remain silent about FGM/C. However, believing in the power of word of mouth, the program was launched with confidence that women would find their way to the support group once they knew it existed.

The program began with meetings in the conference room of a church in the District of Columbia, relying mostly on emails, telephone, and word of mouth to engage participants. Even when the COVID-19 pandemic forced a shift to virtual sessions, the word-of-mouth approach remained highly effective. Service providers were mobilized to share information about the support group with their clients, leading to an increase in interest shown via text messages, phone calls, and emails.

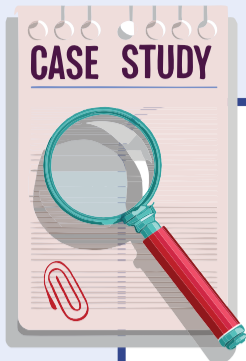
Sessions are monitored by a licensed psychologist who volunteers her expertise to offer group and individual support. The program's planning and development are kept flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of participants, with a screening questionnaire created to better understand their backgrounds. Although challenges have included finding a convenient location for in-person group sessions and obtaining firm commitments from participants, GWPF continues to thrive, demonstrating the power of community connections and shared experiences.



*“In the beginning, we didn’t know, we were at a loss. We wanted to start the support group and we didn’t know where we were going to find the survivors to attend the support group. Our vice president actually asked me, when we started, ‘How will we find the survivors’ and I said, ‘**As long as we start it, they will find us. They will come**’... and I was right, it turned out to be right. Once we got started the word got out. We didn’t have to advertise it, or promote it. People started coming.”*

-Angela Peabody, GWPF





Anolee Sisters

A health educator and founder of Anolee Sisters played a pivotal role in building community trust and facilitating discussions about FGM/C within the Ethiopian community in Minnesota. Her work included collaboration with the Oromo Community Center, where she served as a board member. Initially, because of COVID-19, the sessions shifted online, creating a comfortable space for participants to continue conversations around FGM/C remotely. As restrictions eased, the gatherings resumed in person, continuing to foster a welcoming environment.

Word of mouth proved to be highly effective. Always answering calls and questions made participants feel comfortable and valued. Women recruited each other, and the positive event turnouts were a testament to the success of this approach. The program was organized into 6-week cohorts, with gift certificates distributed upon completion to foster a sense of community among participants. Even after these sessions concluded, ongoing workshops were held to continue conversations around FGM/C and empowerment, allowing new members to easily integrate and providing opportunities to discuss new topics based on participant feedback.

These efforts brought women together, addressing not only FGM/C but other pertinent issues within the community. Participants expressed a desire for ongoing sessions, highlighting the need for continuous support and engagement. Through the health educator's work at IIM and connections with Anolee Sisters, she successfully used word of mouth to expand reach and strengthen community engagement, demonstrating the power of personal connections and shared experiences in addressing sensitive issues like FGM/C.



“I started with my close friend, and then the women recruit each other—they bring each other as family or friend. They just keep bringing members.”

-Rufo Jiru, Anolee Sisters

These case studies illustrate how important it is to encourage thinking critically about engagement based on the audience's needs and interests. Meeting people where they are comes with an understanding of the social and cultural structure of the communities you engage, which can impact building engagement around sensitive topics like FGM/C.

[Click here to go back to the “Strategies to Conduct Survivor and Community Engagement” Overview Map at the beginning of this section.](#)

2. Relationship Building

Credible Messengers

Community buy-in from key stakeholders can guide your way to finding individuals who can serve as credible messengers. This strategy has proven particularly effective for organizations attempting to engage overlooked demographics.



African Family Health Organization (AFAHO)

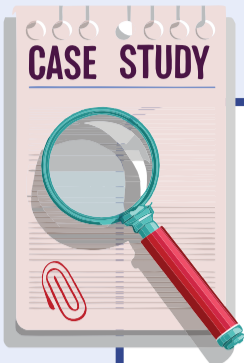
The African Family Health Organization (AFAHO) recognized that a significant portion of its clients come from communities that practice Islam. To effectively engage these communities, AFAHO actively sought opportunities to collaborate with Imams at community mosques within the regions they serve. AFAHO had built a strong rapport with Imams over many years, having interacted with them through various programs in the past. This long-standing relationship added credibility and trust to the initiative. Additionally, many of AFAHO's cultural health navigators are Muslim and have strong ties to the Muslim community in Philadelphia, further reinforcing these connections.

Given the mosque's proximity to AFAHO's agency and its critical role in supporting immigrant communities, this collaboration was a natural extension of past joint initiatives, such as clothing distributions and health education programs on nutrition, heart health, and breast cancer.

When approaching the Imams, AFAHO explained why their support was crucial in addressing FGM/C.⁴ AFAHO emphasized the need to disentangle the misconception that Islam and FGM/C are correlated, highlighting that FGM/C is not mentioned in the Quran. It communicated the importance of the issue by informing Imams that some of the women attending their services may likely be impacted by FGM/C, thereby building a strong case for why the topic deserves attention and action.

Continued on next page. 

⁴Diagana, K., & African Family Health Organization. (n.d.). Understanding and combating FGM/C: A service provider's guide for supporting Sub-Saharan African Muslim communities in the United States. <https://files.constantcontact.com/2a712ec8801/163a8f06-9b37-453c-bc30-7b43b00cb606.pdf?rdr=true>



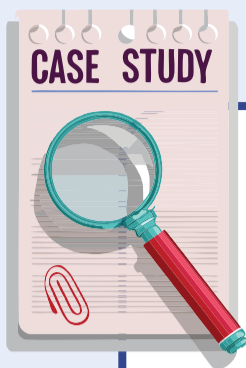
AFAHO (continued)

By using the mosque as a space for health education and sharing information, AFAHO was able to reach a wider audience and foster trust within the community. This collaboration also opened doors for AFAHO to bring other religious leaders into the fold, including Christian pastors from West African communities. By working closely with Imams and other religious leaders, AFAHO effectively leveraged their influence as credible messengers to raise awareness and foster dialogue within the community.



“We work a lot with religious leaders, I think that’s kind of a huge piece of our work with FGC. Particularly because most of our women... practice Islam... So partnering with religious imams and other leaders at mosques and churches has been another place to engage the community.”

-Dianne Uwayo, AFAHO



African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA)

In 2021, the African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA) aimed to enhance its community engagement model by setting up a community advisory board to inform its programs and initiatives, particularly those addressing FGM/C. Through word of mouth, ACANA identified potential advisory board members through previous engagements and internal organization meetings. It focused on individuals who had shown involvement, interest, and knowledge in the local community and in FGM/C.

ACANA invited these recommended individuals to meetings where the advisory board's goals were explained as they relate to programming around FGM/C. Invitations were followed up with personalized letters and one-on-one meetings to further engage potential members and address any questions or concerns. This personalized approach helped in securing committed and credible members.

The advisory board included a diverse mix of community voices, such as survivors of FGM/C, students, service professionals, and other key community members. Notable members included a gynecologist, a social scientist, a community developer, a businessman, an Imam, and a clerical worker. The connection with the Imam was facilitated through a Muslim health navigator at ACANA, improving engagement efforts with the local Muslim community. The Imam was instrumental in allowing ACANA to attend the mosque and meet with women and men, enhancing recruitment efforts through his influence.

The advisory board members, who live and work within the community, meet quarterly to discuss all matters related to FGM/C, actively support outreach events, and develop agendas and reports. Through this process, the board members hold the organization accountable to its commitments, ensuring that the initiatives remain community focused and relevant. The board members serve as credible messengers, leveraging their positions and relationships within the community to foster trust and encourage participation in ACANA's initiatives.

“These are people who live in a community and a lot of them have had FGM or they are close in contact with it. So they meet every three months and they talk about everything related to female genital mutilation. So that’s how we are able to reach out [to the community].”

-Nettie Johnson, ACANA

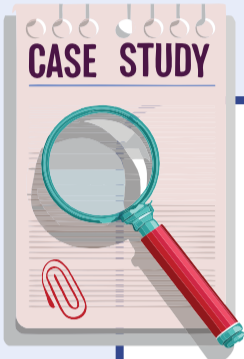
Click below to view a clip from a webinar delivered by Wonder Guannu from ACANA about how a community advisory committee of credible messengers informs their work.

You can view the [full webinar here](#).

The image is a promotional slide for a webinar. At the top left is the 'sahiyo' logo with the tagline 'United Against Female Genital Cutting'. At the top right is the 'RTI INTERNATIONAL' logo. The main title is 'Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C'. Below the title is a portrait of Wonder Guannu, a woman wearing a colorful headwrap and a blue and green patterned top. A large play button icon is overlaid on the portrait. To the right of the portrait, the text reads 'Wonder Guannu' and 'Project Coordinator'. At the bottom right is the 'ACANA' logo with the tagline 'AFRICAN CULTURAL ALLIANCE OF NORTH AMERICA'.

Sharing Stories

Sharing personal stories makes the issue of FGM/C more relatable and accessible, showcasing the resilience of survivors and the complexity of their experiences. These narratives foster deeper community trust and engagement by highlighting paths toward healing and advocacy.

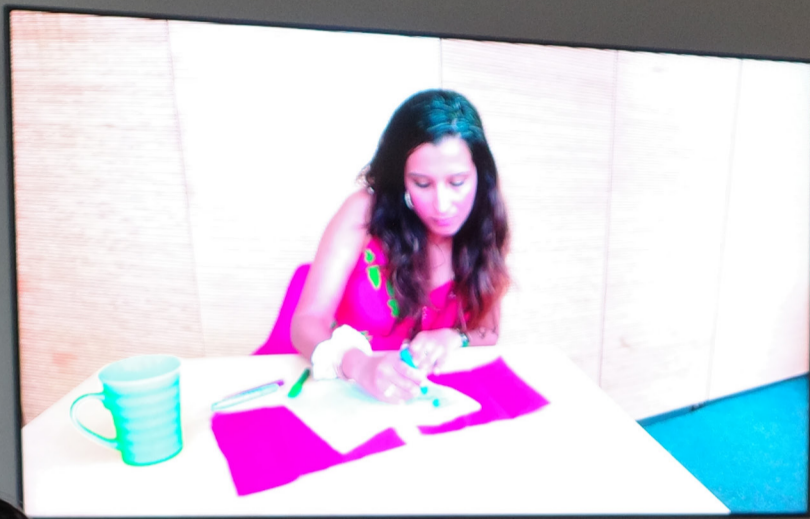


Sahiyo

Since 2018, Sahiyo U.S. has hosted [Voices to End FGM/C](#) digital storytelling workshops in partnership with Silence Speaks, as part of the Sahiyo U.S. peer support programming for survivors and diverse communities impacted by FGM/C. These workshops create a safe space where individuals can gather virtually or in person to share their personal stories connected to FGM/C.

The workshop co-facilitators and support team are trusted individuals with expertise in public health and GBV from partner organizations with which Sahiyo has built strong relationships over the years. Together, Sahiyo and its partner organizations have established a trauma-informed approach characterized by providing on-call mental health support and making adaptations to the workshop guided by the input of participants, ensuring the program remains responsive to participants' needs and experiences. A central part of the workshop is the "story circle," where participants share their personal experiences with FGM/C or their involvement as advocates within a supportive peer group. This process allows participants to gain agency over their narratives and form strong bonds of empathy and support within this new community.

After the workshops, participants are prepared for the public release of their digital stories through a virtual digital story screening session. This sustained engagement continues long after the workshop concludes, as participants often join Sahiyo webinars and events, sometimes volunteering with the organization. Alumni of the program stay connected through an email distribution list and participate in follow-up activities such as the Voices Healing Circle, a support network designed to provide ongoing camaraderie and discussion. This continuous connection helps sustain the impact of the workshops, ensuring that participants continue to grow as leaders and advocates in their communities.



“Sahiyo began with sharing stories of FGM/C in the [Dawoodi] Bohra community alone, but as the number of stories grew and were shared widely, these stories inspired people from other countries and communities, like those in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, to step forward and shed light on FGM/C that was happening where they lived, too.”

-Mariya Taher, Sahiyo U.S.



How Can Digital Storytelling Engage Communities?

Over the past 3 decades, digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful method for addressing sensitive health and human rights issues. The Silence Speaks program pioneered a trauma-informed approach to digital storytelling, offering workshops globally to enhance community engagement, support survivors of trauma, and spur action for justice. Its approach involves intensive participatory storytelling workshops where participants are guided through a hands-on process to create short, first-person videos documenting their experiences.

Digital storytelling can be particularly impactful in addressing FGM/C by

- providing a platform for survivors to share their experiences and foster a deeper understanding of the issue;
- creating empathy and solidarity within practicing communities by highlighting the personal and emotional aspects of FGM/C;
- mobilizing community members and leaders to take action against FGM/C by presenting compelling personal narratives;
- encouraging dialogue and education about FGM/C, helping to break the silence and reduce stigma associated with the practice.

By providing a safe space for participants to share their stories and connect with others, digital storytelling workshops support individual transformation and build resilience for involvement in social justice movements.

Additionally, digital storytelling helps dispel widespread misconceptions about whom FGM/C affects and where it occurs. Recognizing the global nature of FGM/C and uplifting the voices of those impacted can lead to advocacy for policy changes and funding to build programs aimed at ending FGM/C. To learn more, read [Appendix B](#).

CASE STUDY



Anolee Sisters

A health educator and founder of Anolee Sisters leveraged her network to enhance engagement with programs at the International Institute of Minnesota (IIM). She began by sharing her personal story of FGM/C in support group settings and individual conversations, which helped her build meaningful relationships within the community and foster trust. This approach encouraged survivors and nonsurvivors to share their stories, learn about health, and advocate for each other.

Starting with sharing her own experience, she created a safe and welcoming environment that encouraged other women to share their stories, some for the first time. This openness helped nonsurvivors understand the realities of FGM/C, equipping them with the knowledge to support survivors and raise awareness. Her sessions included discussions on the health impacts of FGM/C, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue. These sessions were female only, involving women primarily from Ethiopian and Somali communities. This setting respected cultural sensitivities and provided a safe space for dialogue. Over time, participants expressed a desire to invite elder women as speakers, recognizing their influence and power within the community. Efforts were also made to engage men, although these initiatives were still developing when she left IIM.

By sharing personal stories, impacted and nonimpacted communities were effectively reached. These efforts helped identify allies who could become ambassadors, continuing the engagement on FGM/C within the community. This approach ensured that the conversation remained active and impactful, demonstrating the power of sharing personal stories to foster deeper community trust and engagement.

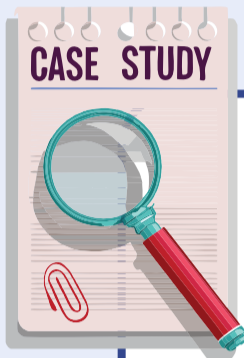


“Unless you are engaged with the community, it’s very very hard to recruit women. They are culturally very sensitive. And they really don’t want to talk about it, about FGM/C, the harmful practice they have been through. For example, I am the impacted, the victim of FGM/C, I have the same experience as them and they feel comfortable to talk to me about it. They don’t trust you by the title, they trust you if you build a relationship with the community.”

-Rufo Jiru, Anolee Sisters

Longevity of Engagement

Sustained engagement over time demonstrates an organization's dedication and reliability, reinforcing its commitment to supporting the community.



Nile Sisters Development Initiative (NSDI)

NSDI has emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive rapport with its clients within its Employment Facilitation and Family Advocacy and Education programs. Consistently meeting clients' needs is crucial for the success and longevity of these programs. However, staff turnover presented a significant challenge, limiting the ability to maintain an ongoing personalized approach. Relationships had to be continually redeveloped between service providers and clients, causing potential disruptions in service continuity and trust.

NSDI's president and CEO, who is deeply embedded in the community, has a strong rapport within the community. Clients frequently come to her through word of mouth and prefer speaking with her directly. It takes time for clients to feel comfortable transitioning to other staff members. Recognizing the importance of trust and safety in client engagement, NSDI implemented several strategies to ensure a reliable and consistent point of contact for clients.

NSDI developed a process for a warm handoff by rotating on-call staff. This approach involved maintaining a standard phone number and email address across multiple staff members, ensuring clients did not feel overwhelmed by switching between various staff contacts. Clients became more receptive to responding, recognizing the familiar contact details. NSDI also ensured that one person was always responsible for client engagement, even during staff transitions. This strategy helped maintain the consistency and reliability clients needed, reinforcing the organization's dedication to the community.



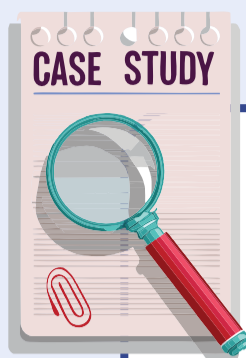
“With a topic like this and this being such a sensitive issue, we try to do warm handoffs, but we know that it takes several times. So that’s why our president and CEO is very much embedded in the community, almost so that she is the face of the organization so clients will come to her through word of mouth. And so it takes a lot of patience.”

-Breanne Lash, NSDI



“A lot of our clients come back to our agency for up to five years when they are wanting to apply for their citizenship. Four years later, they are eligible for citizenship. This long period of time, we touch the families for extended periods of time and it helps us gain trust in these communities, so people just walk in for these services.”

-Hana Abdelbaki, US Together



US Together

Over the years, US Together Inc. has built lasting relationships with refugee and migrant families who find themselves in need of various services, such as mental health counseling and citizenship application assistance. Recognizing many of its clients were seeking asylum due to FGM/C, the organization built an extensive network with agencies to streamline referrals, preserving client trust and engagement.

To meet the diverse needs of its clients, US Together has collaborated with mental health counselors, immigration lawyers, and healthcare providers to offer in-house support, from securing citizenship and green cards to providing healthcare benefits like prescriptions and cost-free doctor visits. Although US Together's initial engagement with clients typically lasts only the first 90 days of their stay in the United States, additional grants often enable the organization to extend its assistance. Frequently, US Together sees members of these communities returning for services for up to 5 years, seeking help with citizenship, healthcare, and legal matters. The breadth of its programs and services, which address many facets of its clients' lives, fosters a sense of continuity and trust, allowing clients to move smoothly from one program to another.

When this is not possible, the organization has invested in building up local resources to ensure ongoing support. This collaborative effort has involved partnering with pro bono legal service providers in Columbus to help them understand FGM/C and its implications for asylum claims and collaborating with Legal Aid of Columbus to create a letter template for women to take to their obstetrician/gynecologist appointments, facilitating the retrieval of supportive statements for their asylum claims. Additionally, US Together provided clinics with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention booklets explaining FGM/C and its long-term effects.

Relationship building emerges as a cornerstone to program sustainability, where raising awareness and sharing stories about FGM/C is most effective when initiated from within impacted communities.

Engaging diverse stakeholders in these conversations drives a more comprehensive approach to building trust and community buy-in from survivors and community members.

[Click here to go back to the “Strategies to Conduct Survivor and Community Engagement” Overview Map at the beginning of this section.](#)

3. Accessibility

Creating Accessible Spaces

Service delivery has a dynamic nature and involves proactively developing responsive strategies that are accessible to meet the diverse needs of individuals and the broader community.



International Survivors And Family Empowered (iSAFE)

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, International Survivors And Family Empowered (iSAFE) adapted its programming for immigrant and refugee survivors to ensure continued access to its services on virtual platforms, using applications such as WhatsApp and Zoom to connect with clients. Initially, iSAFE noticed low participation due to clients' limited technical literacy. In response, it developed and provided one-on-one and small community training sessions. These sessions covered foundational skills, such as downloading and logging into Zoom accounts, sending links through WhatsApp, and using language interpretation tools and other accessibility features available on Zoom.

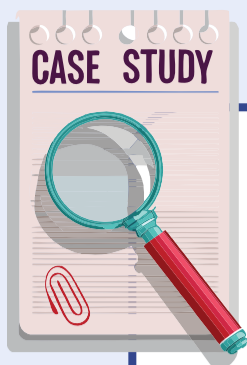
Building up the technical skills of clients was time consuming—up to 2 hours per one-on-one session—but it ensured that community members felt comfortable using digital tools. This was crucial for maintaining client engagement virtually. Over time, members grew more comfortable with using newer communication technology, and digital platforms became a central hub where they could register and get information for upcoming events and resources.

Before jumping into discussions around FGM/C, iSAFE incorporated icebreakers to facilitate a more welcoming and get-to-know-each-other environment. This approach was particularly important because participants were more shy meeting virtually than they had been in person. The icebreakers helped create a safe environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences with FGM/C. By addressing technical barriers and fostering a safe, supportive environment, iSAFE has enhanced its connection with the community by offering more flexible engagement opportunities and ways to access information.

“WhatsApp works better for the community. For one-on-one sessions and community meetings, I’ve used Zoom and provided training to make it easier for people to attend. We removed barriers like passwords and email sign-ups by creating simple links and sending them via text message or WhatsApp, so they can just click and join.”

-Fardus Ahmed, iSAFE





US Together

US Together has organized in-person support groups for victims of FGM/C in Columbus, Ohio, ensuring these sessions are held in locations that are easily accessible within clients' neighborhoods. This localized approach significantly reduces travel barriers and makes it more convenient for clients to attend.

Recognizing that childcare responsibilities often prevent participation in such programs, US Together also provides childcare support. By addressing this common barrier, it enables more clients to engage fully in the support groups without the stress of arranging alternate childcare. This combination of geographically convenient locations and childcare support has been instrumental in fostering a more inclusive, caring, and welcoming environment. Facilitating opportunities for individuals to gather in person has led to three main support group opportunities in the organization's FGM/C programming, including the following:

Art therapy group was for Tigrinya-speaking women from Eritrea and used art-based trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy.

Women's health and wellness group catered to Arabic-speaking clients from Sudan, Libya, and Egypt, as well as English-speaking women from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Somalia, focusing on navigating the U.S. healthcare system and addressing wellness topics.

Quilting support group used quilting as a metaphor for healing and rebuilding, helping participants recognize and manage stress while offering opportunities for individual counseling.

By addressing logistical and emotional needs, US Together has succeeded in making its in-person spaces accessible and supportive, ensuring that clients feel comfortable and engaged. This approach has enhanced participation and ensured that services are more accessible to those the organization is attempting to engage.

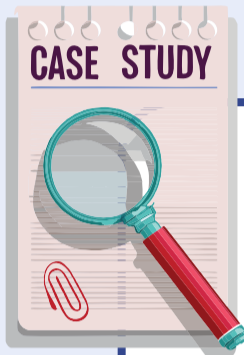


“Community engagement is very important because a lot of our clients face a lot of barriers to getting services. So creating those outreach and educational community events that we do in different apartment complexes here in Columbus, where most of our refugee and immigrant clients live, provides an opportunity for us to be in the neighborhoods, be where our clients live, and help introduce them to the different services that we have at US Together.”

-Hana Abdelbaki, US Together

Language as a Facilitator

Acknowledging the linguistic diversity within communities underscores the need for language accessibility and tailoring outreach to reflect varying cultural attitudes.

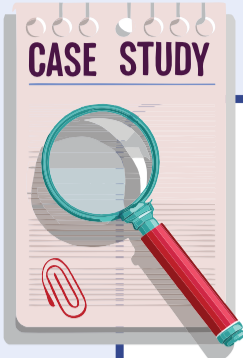


Anolee Sisters

In Anolee Sisters' efforts to disseminate information about FGM/C, its events, and support groups to the public, the organization noticed a significant difference in the number of responses received between email and WhatsApp. WhatsApp proved highly effective for engagement and dialogue from the communities Anolee Sisters sought to serve, unlike emails, which received a poor response rate.

Understanding that WhatsApp was the better medium for communication, the organization also recognized that language and literacy levels continued to pose challenges, even when communicating in much of the community's native language, such as Oromo. To address these challenges, Anolee Sisters began using WhatsApp's voice notes feature instead of text messages. This allowed the organization to share messages in different languages and dialects, thus achieving a broader reach and better engagement from its diverse community.

This strategy proved crucial for community members who were new to the United States, learning English, and trying to build connections in an unfamiliar environment. By overcoming language barriers and making communication more accessible, Anolee Sisters fostered a sense of inclusion and support. This helped newcomers feel more comfortable and integrated, enhancing their participation in events, programs, and resources offered by the organization.



African Family Health Organization (AFAHO)

AFAHO recognized that effective communication and engagement were hindered by the variety of languages spoken by its clients, necessitating the development of culturally sensitive communication strategies to bridge the gap. To address these challenges, AFAHO implemented a multifaceted approach that combined language-specific WhatsApp groups and the hiring of multilingual staff, ensuring that services were accessible to and inclusive of the community.

The language-specific WhatsApp groups at AFAHO were overseen by staff members proficient in the respective languages, serving as dynamic platforms for sharing culturally sensitive materials and providing timely information. Within these WhatsApp groups, AFAHO shared materials relevant to the community's needs, which included information about FGM/C, health services, and support resources, all presented in a way that respected cultural norms and values. By leveraging a popular communication tool, the multilingual resources AFAHO developed allowed for greater distribution and real-time interactions with clients.

This strategy was, overall, enhanced by AFAHO's responsiveness to the demographics of its community. For instance, if it noticed a significant rise in the number of clients speaking Haitian Creole, the organization would prioritize hiring staff who could support this client base. AFAHO often aims to hire individuals already within its network, such as long-standing volunteers or clients who have been actively involved with the organization. This ensures that language barriers do not prevent individuals from accessing the support and services they need. Additionally, having multilingual staff available during in-person visits creates a more inclusive and supportive environment.



“Language is key, you know, when folks are in this new country trying to learn a new language. It is a breath of fresh air when they can come, if they need support, to come to someone who speaks their language and knows their culture, especially around FGC.”

-Dianne Uwalo, AFAHO

Click below to view a clip on how language can allow for building trust among the community members you are engaging with.

You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

The image is a promotional slide for a webinar. At the top left is the **sahiyo** logo (United Against Female Genital Cutting). At the top right is the **RTI INTERNATIONAL** logo. The main title is **Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C**. In the center is a large play button icon. Surrounding the play button are four circular portraits of speakers: Wonder Girl (Project Coordinator), Breanne Lash (Director of Programs), and Mariya Taher (Moderator). Logos for ACAN (African Cultural Alliance of Niles) and Nile Sisters (Development Initiative) are also present.

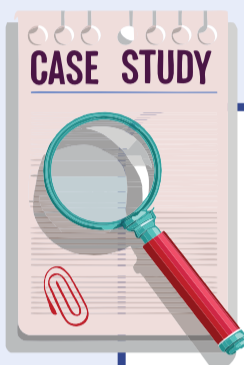
Learning about the sociocultural nuances of the communities involved and identifying appropriate methods to improve the reach of support services are crucial steps in fostering an inclusive environment for educational opportunities. By being responsive to the evolving needs of their communities, these organizations demonstrate the importance of building a supportive environment where all individuals can access necessary information and services.

[Click here to go back to the “Strategies to Conduct Survivor and Community Engagement” Overview Map at the beginning of this section.](#)

4. Event Methodology

Aim of Efforts

How organizations tailor their approach to discussing FGM/C within their programming can significantly influence community engagement and attitude shifts over time.



Sahiyo

In 2018, Sahiyo U.S. established its Activists Retreat program, designed to bring together individuals from the South Asian Dawoodi Bohra community impacted by FGM/C. From the start, this proactive and transparent approach involved openly discussing the program's focus on FGM/C, which helped to draw in participants who were forthcoming about their experiences and actively engaged in the movement. These individuals had never before been in a space with others from their same background who also were anti-FGM/C, creating a unique and supportive environment.

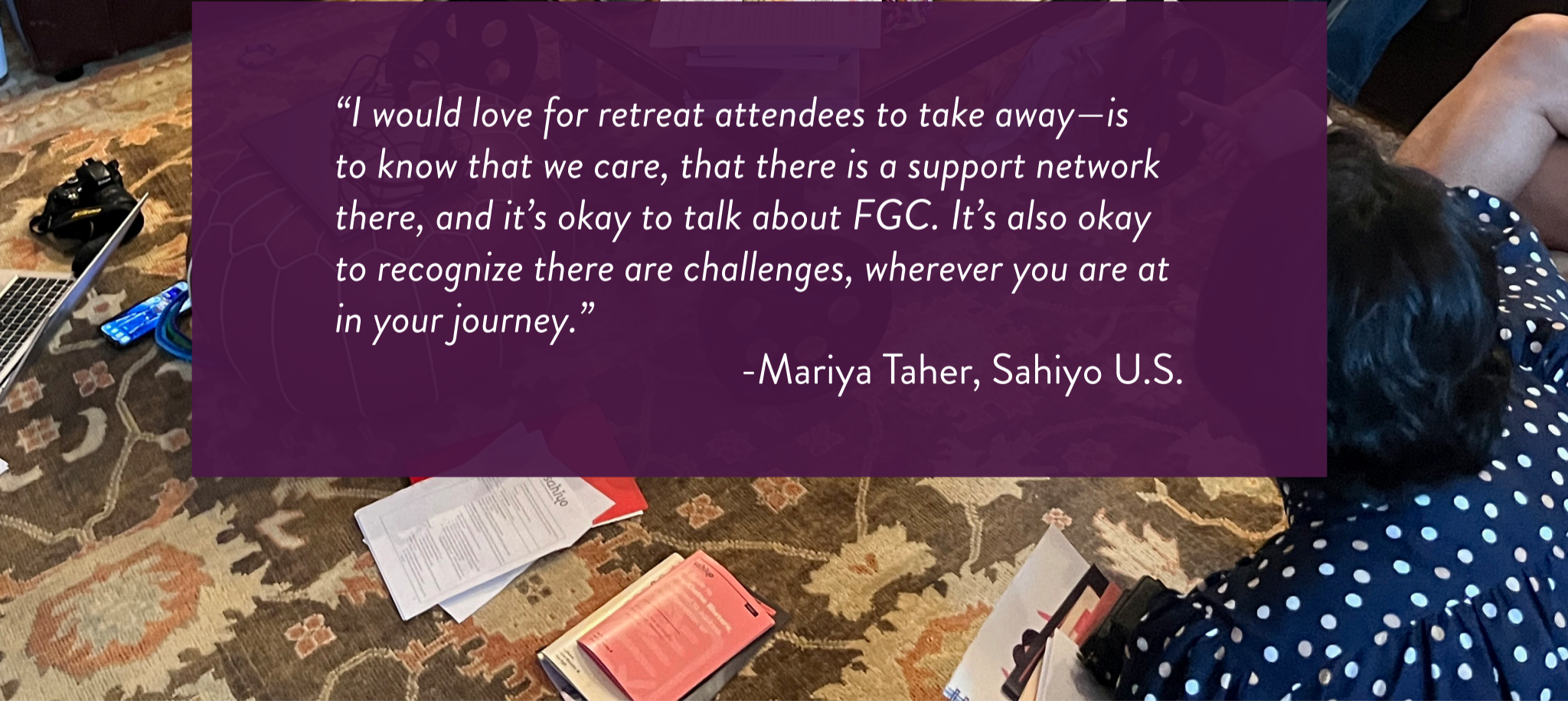
The retreats included a variety of workshops and sessions aimed at fostering open dialogue and shared learning. Participants engaged in interactive activities such as group discussions, personal storytelling, and advocacy training. Notable speakers and experts were invited to share their insights on FGM/C, providing valuable knowledge and resources to the attendees. These activities were designed to encourage participant engagement and create a sense of community among individuals who had previously felt isolated in their experiences.

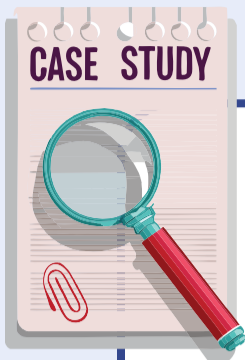
To overcome challenges in planning and relevance of discussion topics, Sahiyo U.S. continuously gathers feedback from participants to adapt content and approach for future retreats. Additionally, each year, Sahiyo U.S. recruits a planning committee composed of past retreat attendees who coordinate the structure of future retreats. As the Activists Retreat program has grown, additional survivors and community members from the Bohra community have reached out to Sahiyo U.S. to learn more and join upcoming retreats, demonstrating the program's success in fostering a strong, supportive community. The retreats have helped participants build lasting connections, furthered their self-esteem and self-confidence to end FGM/C, and, overall, led to increased collective impact toward ending FGM/C. Also, the success of the Activists Retreat program has led to a call for additional retreats that can support other Asian communities beyond the South Asian Bohra community.



“I would love for retreat attendees to take away—is to know that we care, that there is a support network there, and it’s okay to talk about FGC. It’s also okay to recognize there are challenges, wherever you are at in your journey.”

-Mariya Taher, Sahiyo U.S.





NSDI and Sauti Yetu

Although Sahiyo U.S. works with participants ready to discuss FGM/C directly, NSDI and Sauti Yetu employ strategies tailored to communities where FGM/C is not openly discussed. Recognizing the need for a more gradual introduction of the topic, NSDI and Sauti Yetu have adapted their strategies to meet clients and community members “where they are,” ensuring that their efforts around FGM/C are fully culturally attuned. Ultimately, which direction to choose (the direct or the indirect method) involves gauging community readiness and receptiveness to discuss FGM/C openly.

NSDI and Sauti Yetu prioritize cultural attunement in their approach, which means considering not only how to talk about FGM/C, but also when and in what contexts. For example, FGM/C is not widely or often spoken about in many of the spaces where community members gather, such as mosques, churches, and schools. However, these are prime locations for community education, because they are spaces where people already come together and seek connection around shared culture. By building relationships with these organizations, their key leadership, and their members, NSDI and Sauti Yetu create opportunities to discuss sensitive topics like FGM/C. This trust opens doors to conversations that would otherwise be difficult to initiate.

Additionally, both organizations recognize that FGM/C may not be an appropriate topic for the first interaction with a new community member or group. First offering general discussion groups and educational sessions around related but broader topics, such as reproductive and relationship health, can lay the groundwork for discussions about FGM/C and how it fits into the context of a person’s larger physical, emotional, and social health.

Continued on next page.



CASE STUDY



NDSI and Sauti Yetu (continued)

NSDI and Sauti Yetu’s incremental approach to discussing FGM/C allows community members to not feel alienated or pressured and creates space for each individual to shape their own processing of their lived experience. For example, Sauti Yetu does not ask program participants to disclose their FGM/C status in any group settings and does not require anyone to confirm having been cut to participate in their community offerings. Having to state FGM/C status can be isolating or traumatizing, or it can create barriers to care because some individuals are fearful of legal and social repercussions of disclosing their experience with FGM/C. Additionally, not all survivors are aware that they have experienced FGM/C, particularly if they experienced the practice when they were very young.



“The big thing that we do is definitely a holistic approach. It’s not a one-size-fits-all, and that’s generally how our organization is, so just even zooming out of an FGC lens. Each individual comes for a purpose and we kind of use it or we kind of work with individuals starting at what they communicate their needs are. And then from there as we’re working and building rapport. We’re kind of assessing what other things that we have available that they may find beneficial and offering it as a soft suggestion not as a force.”

-Breanne Lash, NSDI

Interactivity of Programs

It is important to create a space and engage survivors and community members in a way that is supportive and responsive to their needs, so individuals feel seen, heard, and motivated to effect change.



African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA)

ACANA encountered specific challenges when organizing events that sought to engage men and women. Recognizing the gender dynamics involved in many communities it served, and the cultural sensitivities surrounding discussions on FGM/C, it became apparent that women sometimes refrained from voicing their perspectives in mixed-gender settings. This observation led ACANA to reevaluate and refine the structure of its monthly workshops, which focused on various topics related to FGM/C, including mental health, relationships, and where to find services.

ACANA took this as an opportunity to inquire from regular and consistent participants about ways to redesign some of its resources and outreach programs. Through focus groups, participants were asked about what topics they felt more comfortable sharing or hearing with others. Participants provided input on the appropriateness of certain pictures shown in presentations, and this feedback led ACANA to request presenters to send their PowerPoint slides for review before showing them in workshops, ensuring that the content was appropriate for the audience. ACANA also discovered that conversations around female anatomy and explaining the types of FGM/C often required showing anatomical diagrams, which some participants felt were not appropriate to display in a mixed-gender setting. To address this, ACANA ensured that such detailed discussions were handled sensitively, sometimes separating men and women for these specific sessions or educating male counterparts on this topic before integrating them into a group setting.

Men in the workshops generally showed receptiveness and empathy toward the women, often relating to them as sisters and mothers. This empathy, combined with ACANA's commitment, helped create a supportive environment where men and women felt empowered to learn and discuss in a unified space.

CASE STUDY



African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA)

ACANA has developed a comprehensive multitiered approach to cater to the varied needs of individuals affected by or interested in learning about FGM/C. This approach includes specialized counseling, educational meetings, and confidential check-in meetings, each designed to interrelate and provide holistic support:

Specialized Counseling: Facilitated by nurses, ACANA's specialized counseling sessions focus on the health impacts of FGM/C. These sessions provide a safe and private environment where individuals can receive medical advice, discuss health concerns related to FGM/C, and learn about available healthcare services. Participants are given resources and education about the health-driven and biological aspects of FGM/C, promoting a deeper understanding of the impacts of FGM/C. This foundational knowledge equips individuals with the necessary information to engage more deeply in subsequent educational meetings and discussions.

Educational Meetings: ACANA organizes educational meetings aimed at enhancing community awareness and understanding of FGM/C. These meetings cover a wide range of topics, including the cultural, social, and health aspects of FGM/C. By integrating information clients learned in the counseling sessions, these meetings promote dialogue about ending FGM/C and provide practical information on support services. This continuum of education helps survivors and nonsurvivors understand and support those within the community, fostering a more informed and compassionate environment.

Check-In Meetings: Complementing the specialized counseling and educational meetings, ACANA's check-in meetings offer a confidential space for women to share their experiences, seek advice, and continue to discuss FGM/C.

Specialized counseling sessions lay the groundwork for informed participation in educational meetings, whereas the insights gained from both inform and enrich the check-in meetings. By interrelating these three services, ACANA provides a support system that addresses the diverse needs of individuals and communities impacted by FGM/C.



“If you’re with certain communities, not all, but Somali, Ethiopian, and Sudanese communities, they don’t do well if you have men and women in the same room, men would talk a lot and ask all the questions, women would be very shy ... If we engage these people, we would have women in one room and men in the other room. So you have to know the community that you’re working with well...”

-Nettie Johnson, ACANA



“People who may be a survivor of FGM, would likely see the nurse and the nurse would carry out counseling in her own area. And then people who have not heard about FGM at all and they have just been learning about it will do the monthly meetings. And then we also do something called a check in meeting, where the women can come in at ACANA in-person, meet the health navigators and they just talk about it all, or what they have in their minds.”

-Nettie Johnson, ACANA

Technology Use for Engagement

Through targeted campaigns, informative posts, and shared survivor stories, organizations tap into the power of social media to reach a wider audience, engage with community members, and inspire action against FGM/C.



Sahiyo

Recognizing the importance of involving men from FGM/C-impacted communities in the conversation, Sahiyo U.S. has created and shared content that highlights personal stories, data-driven insights, and advocacy opportunities. One notable program is the Bhaiyo initiative, which aims to engage men and encourage their active participation in the movement against FGM/C. A key example of this initiative is the [Father's Day public awareness campaign](#), which successfully uses social media to surface conversations on FGM/C.

For the Father's Day public awareness campaign, Sahiyo U.S. reached out to community members, inviting them to contribute videos, quotes, and personal stories about their experiences and perspectives on FGM/C, as well as their attempts to engage men in particular in conversation on FGM/C. This inclusive approach allows men to share their voices and show solidarity with survivors, highlighting the role fathers and male relatives can play in protecting and advocating for their loved ones. The campaign effectively used technology to collect, curate, and disseminate these stories via online communication channels such as WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and more, making it possible for a diverse array of voices to be heard globally and further engagement and education on the topic of FGM/C. Additionally, not only was engagement increased online, those who participated in the campaign also were able to connect with individuals in their own networks in person to discuss the issue of FGM/C.

Overall, by leveraging social media, Sahiyo U.S. engaged a wider audience and created meaningful dialogue around FGM/C. Additionally, the Father's Day campaign increased male involvement, as evidenced by the number of individuals applying to become Bhaiyo volunteers by the campaign's end.

“

"The power handed to men via patriarchy comes at a great cost to men's own humanity. Acts of violence don't just drive people apart; they shred the soul, a little bit at a time.

The societal insistence with controlling women's bodies is detrimental to all genders, and to the health of the community as a whole."

- Aarij Abbas



bhaiyo
MEN AGAINST FGC





“In the past few years as part of our Bhaiyo program, social media campaigns like the Father’s Day campaign, Each One, Reach Bhaiyo campaign has been instrumental in raising awareness among men. Our Bhaiyo members active participation in the campaigns have not only led to more male members joining in movement to end FGC but also take firm decision to not let any girl in their family undergo the cut.”

- Chandni Shiyal, Sahiyo India

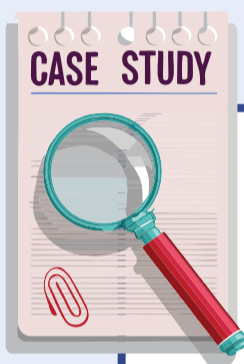
The thoughtful use of event methodology, whether through direct engagement or integrated programming, shows how crucial it is to understand the unique needs of each community and ways to reach more people. Such strategies not only facilitate a deeper connection with the issue at hand, but also empower survivors and community members to voice their experiences and drive the movement toward ending FGM/C.

[Click here to go back to the “Strategies to Conduct Survivor and Community Engagement” Overview Map at the beginning of this section.](#)

5. Safety and Well-Being

Building Peer Support

The diverse experiences and challenges encountered by individuals affected by FGM/C require a platform for sharing and understanding these realities. Therefore, the path forward must be shaped by the insights and perspectives of those most intimately connected to the experience of FGM/C.



Sauti Yetu

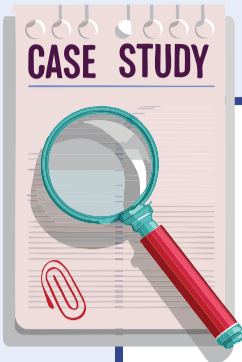
In 2010, Sauti Yetu launched The Hands Project, an oral storytelling initiative that was devised and led by four African high school students who experienced profound discordance between their lived experiences with FGM/C and its portrayal in Western education and media. The goal of the project was to document and better understand the stories and perspectives of young women who are affected by FGM/C—directly or indirectly—and use those learnings to inform the development of supportive resources.

More than 30 peer-to-peer interviews were completed in three languages. Sauti Yetu performed a qualitative analysis of the transcripts or translations of these interviews, and the results indicated a paucity of culturally attuned, trauma-informed resources designed specifically for those who have experienced FGM/C and are living in the United States.

With the support of a U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women grant, Sauti Yetu built The Hands Project resources, a comprehensive set of tailored social services and educational materials. Specific resources include a case management and counseling program, an illustrated booklet, the Our Voice. Our Hands. website (OurVoiceOurHands.org), and an interactive workshop curriculum available to schools, religious organizations, and community groups.

Continued on next page.





Sauti Yetu (continued)

The Hands Project, in all its phases, has provided an opportunity for otherwise unheard voices to contribute to the efforts to empower those affected by FGM/C, which is essential to the prevention and cessation of the practice. Peer-to-peer interviews allowed students to speak—often for the first time—with a person with shared experience in a safe, secure environment. Development of educational resources and one-on-one services that are based on the firsthand input of those affected by the practice is also a means of ensuring that their voices are at the forefront and that there are continued opportunities to enter spaces in which it is safe and acceptable to explore feelings about FGM/C and related, larger topics—like developing the skills to speak up about something complicated and think about ideas of choice, voice, and autonomy.

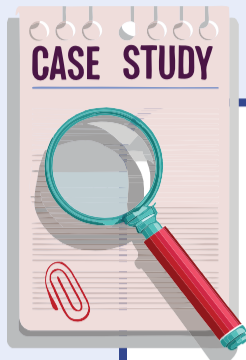
To read more about Sauti Yetu’s The Hands Project and its process for youth engagement, see [Appendix C](#).





*“There was a group of four high school girls who just really felt like their lived experience with FGM/C and being from communities that practice FGM/C was so different from what they were hearing in the media, what they were learning in school. And so they launched a peer-to-peer interview project. And the resources that we have now and the work that we’re doing now is really born out of our analysis of those interviews, looking at them to say, **‘What is the community self-identifying as their own needs?’**”*

- Katharine Conroy, Sauti Yetu



Sahiyo

Sahiyo U.S. has been a champion in creating inclusive spaces that address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ individuals impacted by FGM/C. Recognizing the intersectionality of identities and experiences, Sahiyo U.S. has developed platforms where individuals from shared experiences or identities can connect, share, and support one another. One notable initiative is the creation of inclusive platforms such as [“A Quiet Violence: Navigating Female Genital Cutting as an LGBTQ+ Survivor,”](#) a webinar that provided a safe space for nonbinary and LGBTQ+ survivors to share their experiences.

After numerous conversations with program participants who identified as LGBTQ+ individuals and survivors of FGM/C, this webinar took place as part of the broader efforts of Sahiyo U.S. to support and uplift LGBTQ+ survivors. The webinar attracted a diverse audience, including survivors, allies, healthcare providers, and advocates. Key topics covered during the webinar included the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals who have undergone FGM/C, the intersection of gender identity and cultural practices, and the importance of creating inclusive support systems. Notable speakers included LGBTQ+ activists and FGM/C survivors who shared their personal journeys and insights.

Building on the success of this initial webinar, Sahiyo U.S. aims to explore additional topics and create more opportunities for LGBTQ+ survivors to connect and share their experiences through research and other programming initiatives. Additionally, they seek to support other peer networks in leading conversations that they find important as survivors or community members impacted by FGM/C.



“Choosing to go against the traditions ingrained in me by my faith can be a very lonely experience. Sahiyo⁵, like the name implies, brings people together and reminds me that I am not alone.”

- Umme Kulsoom Arif, Sahiyo U.S.

sahiyo
United Against Female Genital Cutting

A Quiet Violence:

Navigating Female Genital Cutting as a LGBTQ+ Survivor



⁵ Sahiyo is the Bohra Gujarati word for “saheliyo,” or “friends.”

Survivor-Informed Program Design

Using a survivor-informed program design respects survivors' autonomy, acknowledges their diverse needs, and prioritizes their well-being throughout the engagement process.

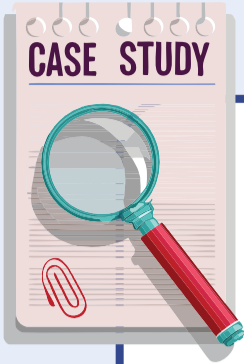


International Survivors And Family Empowered (iSAFE)

iSAFE takes a holistic approach to well-being by incorporating yoga sessions into its support framework. These sessions are carefully designed using a trauma-informed approach to build relationships and comfort among participants over time. Throughout a series of 16 yoga sessions, iSAFE has found that participants are able to reconnect with their bodies, focusing on mental and physical well-being. These sessions create a safe and supportive environment that helps survivors feel more at ease discussing sensitive topics such as FGM/C.

The yoga sessions are not only a physical exercise, but also a space for mental relaxation and emotional healing. Participants learn breathing techniques and mindfulness practices that help them manage stress and anxiety. This holistic approach ensures that survivors are supported comprehensively, addressing their physical, emotional, and psychological needs.

As the sessions progress, the trust and comfort built within the group enhance the effectiveness of discussions around FGM/C. Participants feel more connected and empowered to share their experiences and support one another, fostering a strong sense of community and collective resilience. By integrating trauma-informed yoga sessions into its program, iSAFE respects the autonomy of survivors and prioritizes their overall well-being.



Global Woman P.E.A.C.E Foundation (GWPF)

GWPF's support groups are designed with the understanding that each survivor's journey is personal and unique. These virtual support groups emphasize complete autonomy for participants to decide their level of involvement in the group.

Participants in GWPF's support groups have the freedom to decide how often they attend meetings, the topics for discussion, and even technical aspects such as whether to have their cameras on or off during meetings. This approach allows participants to engage in a manner that feels most comfortable to them. By prioritizing autonomy, GWPF's approach empowers survivors to take control of their healing journey, helping them feel more in control and reducing feelings of pressure or obligation. GWPF acknowledges the diverse needs and preferences of survivors, creating a supportive environment that respects individual choices.

The virtual format adds a layer of accessibility, enabling individuals from different locations to participate without the need for travel. This is particularly beneficial for those who may not have local support networks or prefer the privacy of attending from their homes. The groups are facilitated by trained professionals who use trauma-informed approaches to ensure discussions are handled sensitively and respectfully. Although distance may appear to be the greatest challenge, participants of the virtual support group have been able to build connections across a digital space, share their stories, and offer support to one another, reducing feelings of isolation by joining a network of understanding peers.





“When you feel that you are ready and the group has done something for you and helped you to move from where you were when you came in to the next step and we can concur with that. Then you can move on; you don’t have to stay with the group for any length of time. It’s all up to you.”

- Angela Peabody, GWPF

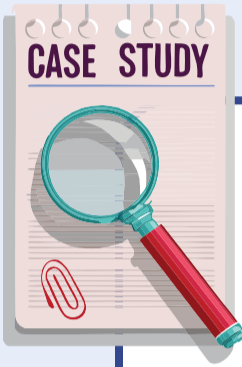
Click below to view a clip on strategies to create survivor-informed programs.

You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

The slide features the Sahiyo logo (United Against Female Genital Cutting) in the top left and RTI International logo in the top right. The main title is "Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C". A large play button is centered over a photo of Aman Masud, Community Engagement Coordinator. The Sahiyo logo is also present at the bottom right.

Follow-Up Care

Ensuring that the support provided is not a one-time effort but a continuous process that adapts to the evolving needs of survivors and communities can strengthen the impact of initial engagement efforts.



African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA)

ACANA has developed a comprehensive follow-up care strategy that emphasizes personalized communications conducted by the organization's health navigators before and after events. This approach has proven successful in increasing attendance, retention, and recruitment efforts, ensuring that individuals feel valued and understood.

Before each event, ACANA reaches out to potential participants with personalized invitations and reminders. These communications are tailored to the individual's previous interactions with the organization, ensuring that each person feels personally invited and acknowledged. By addressing the specific interests and needs of participants, ACANA creates a sense of anticipation and engagement, which helps boost attendance rates. After each event, ACANA reaches out through phone calls or thank-you notes and additional resources related to the event's topic. By gathering feedback and insights about participants' experience with attending an event or program, ACANA demonstrates that it values their opinions and is committed to improving their experiences.

This strategy was developed over time with the desire to have participants reengage and continue attending events or appointments and the realization that FGM/C cannot be fully addressed in a single meeting. By maintaining regular communication, ACANA reminds participants that they can rely on the organization as a safety net and support network.

CASE STUDY



iSAFE

At iSAFE, staff members take time to engage with clients in meaningful ways to ensure they feel comfortable and supported. This approach helps build trust and fosters open and honest communication about FGM/C and other aspects of their lives.

iSAFE staff engage with clients by establishing a welcoming and empathetic environment from the very first interaction. They prioritize listening and understanding each client's unique experiences and needs. This initial engagement often includes casual conversations, personalized check-ins, and active listening, which helps clients feel valued and respected. By taking the time to understand their clients on a personal level, iSAFE staff can create a foundation of trust that supports deeper conversations about sensitive topics like FGM/C.

Consistent and personalized follow-up helps maintain the relationship and trust established during initial engagements. Clients feel that they have a reliable support system in iSAFE, which encourages them to be more open and honest about their experiences and needs. This ongoing communication not only reinforces the support network, but also empowers clients to seek help and share their stories without fear of judgment or stigma.



“Making sure that people are trusting me and feel safe with me, having that experience and that sharing conversation, follow up after the conversation and see what else they need. Addressing other things that are not related to the subject, but what people need.”

- Fardus Ahmed, iSAFE

By focusing on the diverse needs of survivors and employing a trauma-informed approach, these programs not only aid in the healing process, but also empower survivors and communities to reclaim their narratives and contribute to a collective movement toward ending FGM/C.

[Click here to go back to the “Strategies to Conduct Survivor and Community Engagement” Overview Map at the beginning of this section.](#)

“We call them after the meeting and do a survey in three questions. How was the presentation? Do you like the presentation? Is it something you would like to see again and to hear, will you invite a friend next time? Do you like the schedule of the presentation? So we try to do it with a sample number, at the end of the meeting. That has helped us a whole lot. And they like it when you call them and follow up on them, it garners a sign of you having an interest in them, so they will come again.”

-Nettie Johnson, ACANA



Decision Making in Program and Event Planning

Organizing programs and events aimed at engaging survivors and other community members requires careful planning and strategic thinking, especially when addressing sensitive issues like FGM/C. This section provides a structured approach to decision making, equipping organizers with the tools needed to determine the most appropriate type of event or program tailored to specific goals and community needs.

Click below to view a clip where presenters answer a question from the audience on how to start doing FGM/C outreach in their community.

The graphic features a central play button icon. Surrounding it are logos for Sahiyo (United Against Female Genital Cutting), RTI International, Wonder Girl Project Coordinator, ACAN (African Cultural Alliance of Nations), Breanne Lash (Director of Programs), Nile Sisters Development Initiative, and Mariya Taher (Moderator) from Sahiyo.

You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

Step-by-Step Program Planning

Please note that the information outlined here offers a broad framework for planning and is not exhaustive.

Conduct a Community Needs Assessment

Building an understanding of the specific context and needs of a community impacted by FGM/C will support creating targeted, effective engagement efforts. Respectful engagement builds trust, showing the community that their voices and experiences are valued and crucial to shaping the program.



How to Do It

Use methods like surveys, interviews, focus groups, listening sessions, and personal conversations to gather information centered on insights from within the community. Additionally, consider historical and contextual factors that may impact community needs (migrant flow, economic changes, etc.).

Questions to Ask Yourself

- How can I gather information while respecting cultural and privacy concerns?
- Can someone from the community help me with this process?
- How can these insights and conversations guide planning? Am I missing buy-in from specific stakeholders?

Understand Your Audience

Recognizing that different groups may respond better to different approaches based on their unique needs and preferences is important. Understanding the unique cultural contexts and experiences with FGM/C helps in crafting responsive messages and interventions.

How to Do It

Research the cultural norms, traditions, and beliefs prevalent within the community, including those around FGM/C. Examine demographic, cultural, social, and economic factors, using community data or consulting local leaders for insight.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Who is my audience? Men? Teenagers? Women? Or, more specifically, mothers, and so on?
- What languages are common throughout the community I serve? How can I make information more accessible?
- Is my audience comfortable talking about FGM/C? How can I tailor my approach to be culturally sensitive? Are there community organizations I can partner with?

Click below to view a clip where Breanne Lash explains how to work with diverse groups of people to educate us on their experience.



The video player shows a woman, Breanne Lash, smiling. The text on the screen includes the logos for Sahiyo (United Against Female Genital Cutting), RTI International, and Nile Sisters Development Initiative. The main title is "Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C". Below the title, it says "Breanne Lash, Director of Programs". A large play button icon is centered over the video frame.

You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

Define Objectives

Setting clear objectives enables you to track progress or areas for improvement. Although flexibility is valuable, defining objectives aids in maintaining overall focus and direction. Collaborating with community members ensures that goals set forth reflect their priorities and needs.

How to Do It

Determine your goals, such as raising awareness, educating, providing support, or influencing policy around FGM/C, and break down larger objectives into smaller, measurable milestones.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- What do we want to achieve as an organization, and what do we want individuals to achieve?
- Do we want individuals to reengage with us afterward, or is this a one-time event?
- Do we want more men to get involved? Do we need to create a separate space or opportunity for male engagement?

Click below to view a clip where Breanne Lash explains how understanding identities of yourself and your audience impacts engagement.



sahiyo
United Against Female Genital Cutting

RTI
INTERNATIONAL

**Pathways to Progress:
Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C**

Breanne Lash
Director of Programs

Nile Sisters
DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

Choose the Format

Selecting the most appropriate format can create meaningful opportunities for survivors and other community members to share their stories, access support services, and contribute to efforts to end FGM/C within their communities and beyond. Consider factors such as cultural sensitivity, accessibility, participant comfort, and the goals of your initiative.

How to Do It

Recognize the different advantages and challenges each format offers and make informed decisions to create opportunities that your community will respond to. Options may include workshops, presentations, public meetings, support groups, digital forums, and so on.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Which format is most welcoming for meaningful dialogue and interaction? Are there any cultural norms or gender dynamics to consider? Is language support needed?
- What are the interests and preferences of the audience I am engaging? How can these be incorporated to maximize engagement?
- Should this event be hosted in person or online? Can it be hybrid? What are the benefits and what are the challenges?

Click below to view a clip where Breanne Lash describes some of the lessons learned at NSDI.



You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

Plan Logistics and Identify Resources

Planning the logistics and identifying resources available are steps toward ensuring the organizers can achieve their objectives and create a meaningful experience for participants and stakeholders alike. Being mindful in this decision-making process requires adaptability to navigate current and unforeseen circumstances and make adjustments as needed.

How to Do It

Understand your organization's capacity to plan and implement an event, including funding and staff availability. Additionally, think critically about factors such as accessibility, local resources, and other methods to enhance the social acceptability of your programs.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- What resources and capabilities are available? What is our budget? Can we leverage existing resources and relationships?
- Do we want to invite outside speakers? Who can we invite from the community to share their knowledge and experience?
- What are barriers for people wanting to attend our program? Can we provide accommodations, such as food or childcare? Will a digital platform increase attendance?



Safeguard Planning

Developing strategies to mitigate potential risks, such as negative responses, security, and retraumatization and well-being among survivors better ensures the safety and comfort of all participants. Creating a supportive and empowering environment can foster a safe and inclusive space for dialogue, healing, and collective action.

How to Do It

Develop a protocol for staff and participants on how to respond to cultural sensitivities and personal experiences with FGM/C, including direct trauma. Input from stakeholders can assist in creating safe spaces for survivors, which may include offering short- or long-term support services (therapy, medical referrals, legal assistance, etc.).

Questions to Ask Yourself

- How can we promote respectful behavior and a supportive environment? What are community guidelines for staff and participants to follow?
- Do we need to follow up with participants? What steps should we take to maintain engagement? Do we need to provide additional resources?
- Do our event activities or discussions have the potential to trigger memories of traumatic experiences? How can we provide appropriate support to minimize this risk? Whom or what can we have on standby?

Click below to view a clip where Samman Masud describes some of the success and lessons learned around community engagement at Sahiyo.



The image shows a video player interface. At the top left is the Sahiyo logo (United Against Female Genital Cutting). At the top right is the RTI International logo. The main title is "Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C". Below the title is a circular play button icon. To the left of the play button is a portrait of Samman Masud. To the right of the play button, her name and title are listed: "Samman Masud, Community Engagement Coordinator". At the bottom right is the Sahiyo logo again.

You can view the [full webinar](#) here.

Why You Might Choose One Event Type Over Another

Each format—whether one-on-one meetings, support groups, public meetings, in-person events, digital forums, workshops, or presentations—offers unique advantages and challenges. By carefully considering the specific needs, preferences, and cultural contexts of your audience, you can select the most appropriate approach to foster meaningful dialogue, provide support, and enhance awareness.

Diverse Formats of Engagement

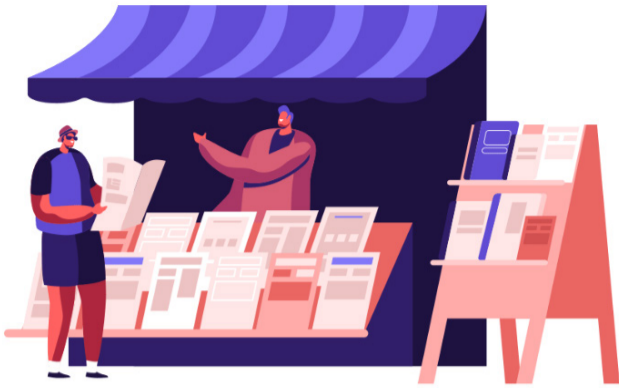
Click the grouping below to skip ahead and learn more about those formats.

In-Person Events
Versus
Digital Forums

One-on-One Meetings
Versus
Support Groups
Versus
Public Meetings

Workshops
Versus
Presentations





Choose *in-person events* if you seek opportunities to create an immersive experience for survivors and the local community where being physically present can create a greater sense of connection.

Examples of In-Person Events

Tabling Outreach: Set up information tables in diverse communities to engage directly with the public. These could be in community centers, local markets, or health fairs.

Community Visits: Engage with individuals in their places of worship (churches, mosques, etc.), health centers, workplaces, and among friends and family networks.

Hair Braiding Salons: Visit salons and other places frequented by women to discuss FGM/C and provide resources in a comfortable and familiar setting.

Community Groups and Celebrations: Participate in preexisting community groups or events where people gather for celebrations to introduce discussions about FGM/C.

Advantages of In-Person Events

- Can lead to more dynamic and engaging interactions, enhancing participation and discussion.
- Allows for real-time, face-to-face communication, which can foster a sense of community and trust among participants.
- Provides a platform for participants to network, which can be invaluable for building support networks and community bonds.

Challenges with In-Person Events

- Participants may struggle to attend due to work commitments or other obligations, limiting flexibility in terms of time and place.
- Typically involves higher logistical costs, including venue, catering, transportation, and accommodation for speakers or attendees (childcare support, transportation support, etc.).
- Some individuals may not be ready to meet with others on their healing journey, preferring information in less formal or more private settings (e.g., phone calls or text messages).



Choose *digital forums* if accessibility is a priority to enable easier and widespread participation.

Examples of Digital Forums

Webinars and Virtual Workshops: Host educational sessions online where participants can learn about the health impacts, legal rights, and support services related to FGM/C and ask questions in real time.

Online Support Groups: Create virtual support groups where survivors can share experiences and receive emotional support in a safe, moderated environment.

Social Media Campaigns: Use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to share survivor stories and educational content and to engage with a broader audience.

Advantages of Digital Forums

- Participants can join from the comfort of their own homes and, in many cases, they can access recorded sessions if they cannot attend live.
- Provides a safer alternative during health crises like pandemics, where physical gatherings may pose risks.
- Are generally less expensive to host because they eliminate the need for physical venues, travel, and accommodation costs.

Challenges with Digital Forums

- Relies heavily on digital literacy, internet connectivity, and access to digital devices, which can be a barrier for some participants.
- Lacks the nuances of face-to-face communication, which can be vital for building deeper relationships and trust, especially in sensitive discussions like those surrounding FGM/C.
- Maintaining engagement in a digital format can be challenging because participants may be more prone to distractions.



Choose *one-on-one meetings* if you need to provide individualized attention, build deep trust, and address personal experiences or sensitive issues directly with participants.

Examples of One-on-One Meetings

Private Counseling Sessions: Meet with individuals in a safe, private setting, like a community center, health clinic, or even their home, and potentially virtual platforms, to provide personalized support.

Confidential Phone Calls: Conduct regular check-ins via phone, or cold calling, for those who might need individual outreach or remote support.

Advantages of One-on-One Meetings

- Allows for focused support, resources, and follow-up actions that respect the unique experiences and needs of individuals and communities impacted by FGM/C.
- Provides an opportunity for in-depth feedback and discussion, enabling a deeper understanding of the participant's background or personal experience with FGM/C.
- Allows for meetings to be scheduled at times that suit the convenience and comfort of participants, accommodating different availability and preferences (phone calls, meeting in person, etc.).

Challenges with One-on-One Meetings

- Establishing initial trust with participants may require time and patience, because they may be hesitant or cautious about confiding in or seeking support from new people.
- Coordinating individual meetings can be difficult, particularly if staff availability is limited.
- Scheduling a follow-up meeting might be difficult if communication with a specific client is irregular, making it further challenging to remain in contact with them.

Deciding between one-on-one versus group engagement?

Take a look at the clip from the webinar below to learn how building and fostering relationships with community members can help engagement in FGM/C work.



The image is a promotional graphic for a webinar clip. It features a light pink background with faint silhouettes of people. At the top left is the 'sahiyo' logo (United Against Female Genital Cutting) and at the top right is the 'RTI INTERNATIONAL' logo. The main title is 'Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C'. Below the title is a circular play button icon. To the left of the play button is a portrait of Aman Masud. To the right of the play button, the text reads 'Aman Masud' and 'Community Engagement Coordinator'. At the bottom right is the 'sahiyo' logo again.

sahiyo
United Against Female Genital Cutting

RTI
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**Pathways to Progress:
Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C**

Aman Masud
Community Engagement
Coordinator

sahiyo
United Against Female Genital Cutting

You can view the [full webinar here](#).



Choose support groups if the goal is to provide a safe space for sharing personal experiences and offering peer support.

Examples of Support Groups

Peer Support Sessions: Regular meetings where individuals can share their stories and support each other, often facilitated by mental health professionals trained in trauma care.

Family Support Groups: Groups focusing on specific issues like health, legal rights, or parenting, tailored to the needs of FGM/C survivors and their families, such as mothers and daughters, helping them understand and support each other.

Social Support Network: A structured network where survivors and community members can connect outside of regular meetings for additional support, fostering ongoing community and resilience.

Advantages of Support Groups

- Offers a confidential and supportive environment for individuals impacted by FGM/C to share their experiences.
- Facilitates emotional healing and peer support, which can be vital for individuals impacted by FGM/C seeking camaraderie or validation.
- Allows for more in-depth, personal discussions, which can be more tailored to needs identified by the group.

Challenges with Support Groups

- Typically involves small groups, which might limit the ability to raise widespread awareness or the opportunity for more personal conversations allowed in one-on-one meetings.
- May require facilitators skilled in handling sensitive discussions, such as those about FGM/C, which can be a resource constraint if staff or community members are not experienced or trained to facilitate.
- The effectiveness can be influenced by group dynamics; negative dynamics can hinder the supportive nature of the group.



Choose *public meetings* if you want to engage a broad segment of the community, raise widespread awareness, and foster a public dialogue.

Examples of Public Meetings

Awareness Campaigns: Informational tables or booths at local businesses or public venues to educate the community about your organization and services that address FGM/C. An awareness campaign can also be done virtually on social media.

Community Forums: Large gatherings where various stakeholders, including community members, service providers, and policymakers, discuss and address FGM/C-related issues and solutions, promoting collaborative efforts and transparency.

Advantages of Public Meetings

- Can attract a wide range of community members, adding diverse views and experiences to the discussion and supporting a more comprehensive community approach.
- Depending on the goal of the meeting, public meetings can serve as a platform for educating or influencing public policy, particularly if stakeholders such as local policymakers and community leaders are involved.
- Promotes transparency and accountability in public affairs, building trust within the community.

Challenges with Public Meetings

- Balancing the diverse expectations and interests of a large group can be challenging, leading to potential dissatisfaction, in addition to recognizing varying levels of understanding and backgrounds.
- Participants may worry about privacy, especially when discussing sensitive issues like FGM/C in a public setting.
- Ensuring the event is accessible to all those expected to attend requires in-depth logistical planning to accommodate and address participants' needs.

Interested in learning more about outreach methods used by those in the field?

Take a look at the clip from the webinar below to learn about some strategies ACANA uses at their organization.



You can view the [full webinar here](#).



Choose *workshops* if you want an interactive setting that encourages participants to learn by doing.

Examples of Workshops

Skill-Building Sessions: Hands-on activities that teach new skills or enhance existing ones, such as digital literacy workshops where participants learn to access online FGM/C resources.

Support and Therapy Workshops: Facilitated sessions focusing on healing, such as art therapy or yoga workshops, that help FGM/C survivors reconnect with their bodies and minds.

Informational Workshops: Sessions that combine lectures with group activities and discussions, such as health education workshops that cover general wellness and specific issues related to FGM/C.

Advantages of Workshops

- Allows participants to be active contributors to the discussion and engage directly with the material, which can enhance learning and retention.
- Smaller group settings enable facilitators to offer more personalized guidance and support to each participant, addressing individual questions and challenges.
- Participants often work or engage in groups or pairs, which can add to the diversity in conversation, in addition to creating a sense of community among participants.

Challenges with Workshops

- Better suited for smaller groups, which might limit the number of participants and reach of the event.
- Often require more preparation from facilitators, including materials for activities and arranging venue, catering, transportation, and other accommodations for speakers or attendees (childcare support, translation, etc.).
- Workshops typically last longer than presentations, requiring a greater time commitment from participants and facilitators, which might be impacted by capacity.



Choose presentations if you aim to reach a larger audience with informational content.

Examples of Presentations

Guest Lectures: Inviting experts to speak on specific topics related to FGM/C, such as healthcare professionals discussing the medical consequences or legal experts on rights and protections for survivors.

Informational Sessions: Presentations on resources available to the community, such as how to access healthcare or specialized FGM/C services.

Panel Discussions: Bringing together experts and community leaders to discuss FGM/C from various perspectives.

Advantages of Presentations

- Suitable for large audiences, presentations can disseminate information to many people at once.
- Generally require fewer logistical preparations and resources than workshops, making them easier to organize.
- Can be accessed by a wider audience, including those who may feel uncomfortable participating in more interactive settings.

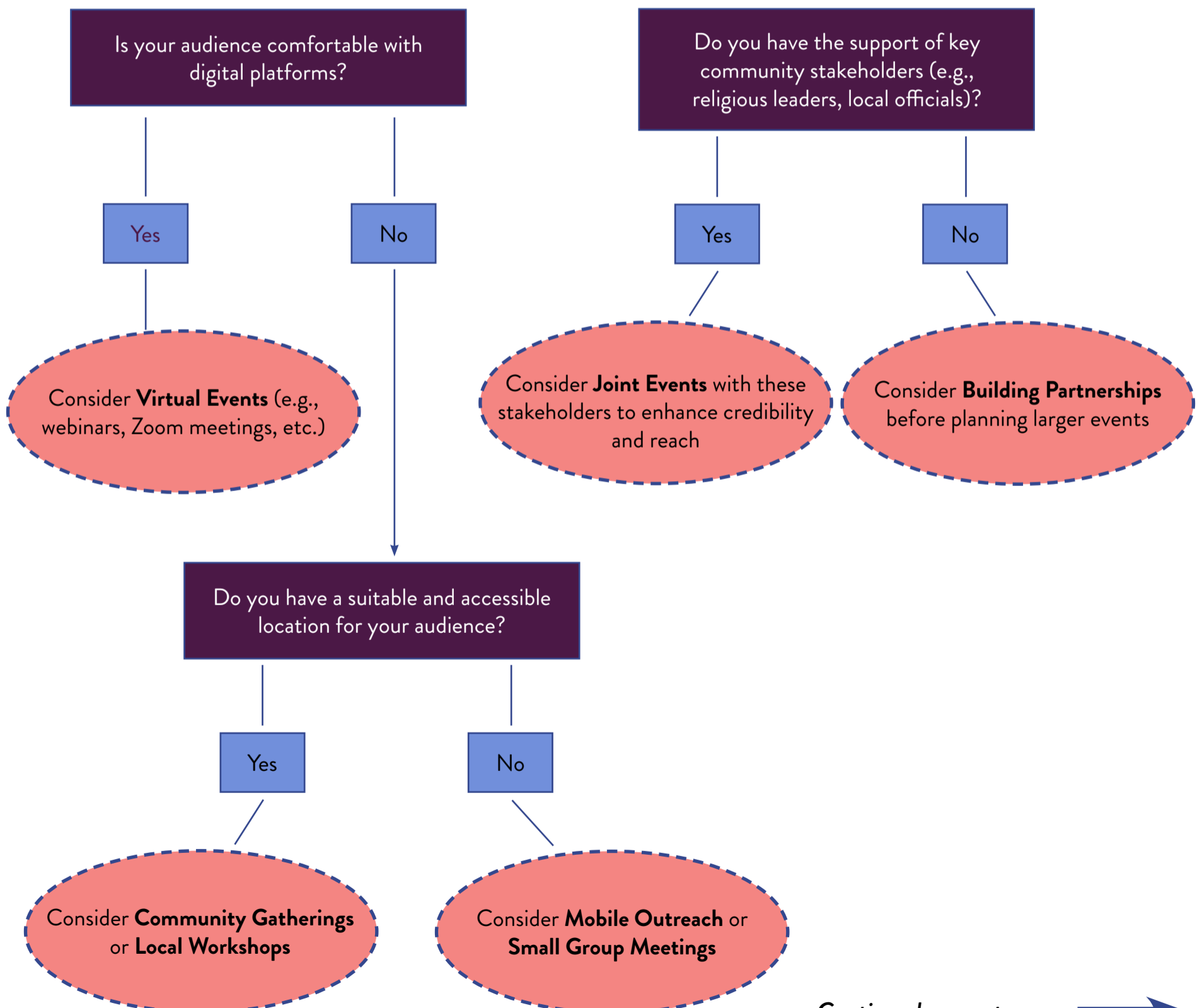
Challenges with Presentations

- Offers minimal opportunity for audience participation, which can be a drawback when discussing complex issues like FGM/C.
- The format may not suit all learning styles and might result in lower retention of information or participation.
- It can be difficult to gauge audience understanding and reaction in real time, which can lead to a disconnect with your participants.

Planning an Event or Program

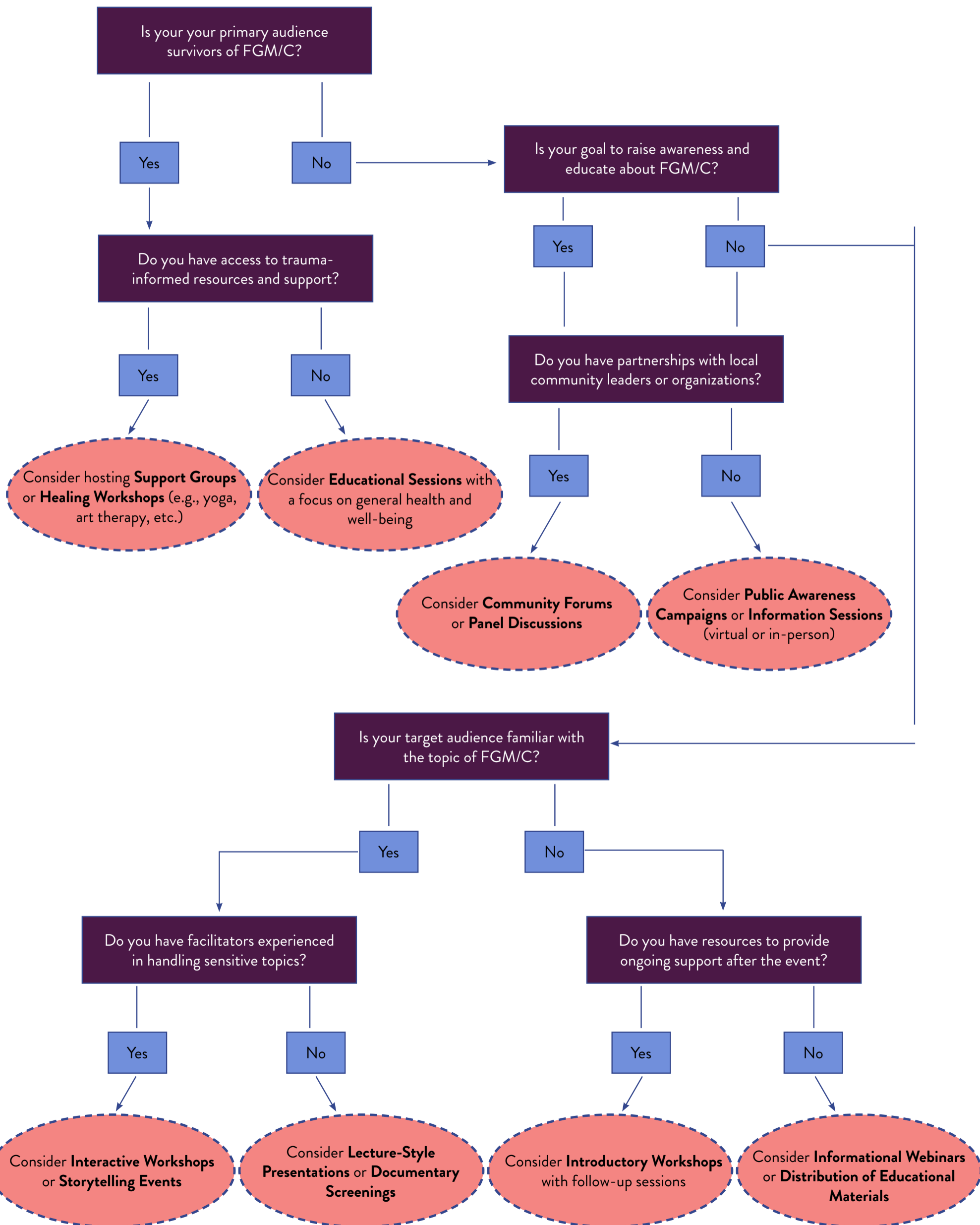
Use the first decision tree to help you think through different modalities and accessibility considerations for the event or program you choose. Then, use the decision tree on the next page to help determine the best type of event or program for your organization to host.

Event Modality and Accessibility Decision Tree



Continued on next page. →

Event or Program Type Decision Tree

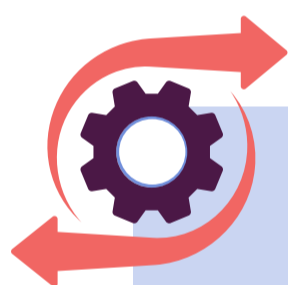


Thoughtful Methodologies for Engagement

Having explored the various event formats and their respective benefits and challenges, it is equally important to consider certain methodologies that can create enhanced experiences with community engagement. This section will address a few strategies, keeping in mind what you already know about the unique needs and cultural contexts of your community to create a supportive environment.

Phased Approach: Implement a phased approach in workshops, starting with general awareness and gradually moving toward more sensitive topics. This allows participants to grow more comfortable with the subject matter and engage at their own pace.

Transparency in Content: Be transparent about the content of events and workshops. Provide clear descriptions and trigger warnings where necessary, allowing participants to make informed decisions about their involvement.



Methodologies in Practice

Tailoring Your Approach Based on Organizational Focus

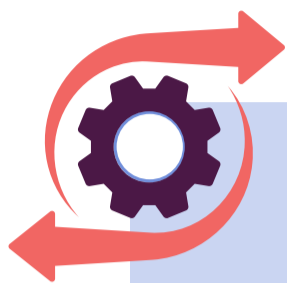
The nature and focus of your organization can significantly influence how you engage with your community. For example, if your organization, like Sahiyo U.S., is known to address FGM/C specifically, your events are likely to have a targeted approach to this sensitive topic. This focus allows you to delve deeply into the nuances and specific needs of the community regarding FGM/C.

In contrast, organizations offering a broad range of services, such as general health, legal, or immigration support, might adopt a more varied approach to engagement. These organizations can integrate discussions on FGM/C within a broader context, making it part of a holistic support system for their community members.

Considering this overarching nuance can better prepare you and your audience for what to expect as you engage deeply with specific issues.

Learn more about [Sahiyo U.S.!](#)

Food: Provide food options to make participants feel comfortable and welcomed. Pay attention to cultural nuances, including appropriate food choices that respect dietary practices.



Methodologies in Practice

Why Food Matters in Community Engagement

In many cultures, food is more than just nourishment—it is a powerful tool for bringing people together and building community. Food can create a welcoming atmosphere, show hospitality, and meet a basic need that might otherwise distract participants from fully engaging. Food is also deeply cultural; by incorporating culturally meaningful foods, you show respect for traditions and make participants feel valued and understood.

Whether offering meals at in-person events or sending care packages for virtual gatherings, food can be a comforting and unifying element that enriches the overall experience!

[Learn more](#) about how incorporating food thoughtfully can help you build stronger connections and support within your community.⁶

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

1

2

3

Implementing daily practices that include nutrition, exercise, and awareness can create more balance and harmony within ourselves on a physical, mental and emotional level. There are three priorities that we emphasize in this guide.

The first priority is having a sense of awareness. Having a relaxed, focused mind through silent contemplation, meditation, and self-reflection strengthens our spirit and allows us to be more in tune with our needs.

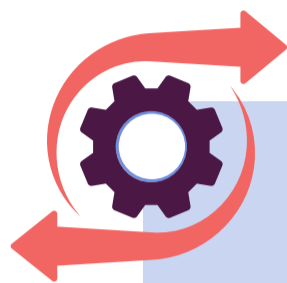
The second priority is activity. Through activities such as qigong, meditative walking, and other movements, we become more in tune with and aware of our bodies which is beneficial to our physical and mental health.

The third priority is nutrition. Food is medicine. By eating the healthy and appropriate foods for us, it enhances the well-being of our mind and body.

9

⁶ National Organization of Asians & Pacific Islanders Ending Sexual Violence. (2023). Wellness guide. <https://www.napiesv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/NAPIESV-API-Wellness-Guide.pdf>

Self Care: Incorporate self-care practices into your programming to support the well-being of survivors. Recognize that discussing FGM/C can be stressful, and weaving in self-care elements can be rewarding and essential. Artistic approaches, such as art therapy, music, and storytelling, can provide therapeutic benefits and create a safe space for participants to express themselves.



Methodologies in Practice

Mind and Body Connection: Trauma-Informed Practices

Trauma-informed art therapy allows individuals to express their emotions and experiences through creative media such as painting, drawing, and sculpture—known to be effective in populations with language barriers and trauma history. This form of therapy provides a nonverbal outlet for processing trauma and can help survivors of FGM/C express feelings that may be difficult to articulate. By focusing on the creative process rather than the end product, participants can explore their inner self and gain insights into their emotions and experiences.

Example: Applying a [trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy](#) approach, US Together successfully implemented an art therapy group for several Tigrinya-speaking women from Eritrea who were survivors and had gone through traumatic experiences before their journey to the United States.

Trauma-informed yoga is designed to help individuals reconnect with their bodies in a safe and supportive environment. It incorporates physical forms and movements, breath work, and mindfulness practices, with a strong emphasis on creating a sense of safety and empowerment for participants. Unlike traditional yoga, [trauma-informed yoga](#) avoids physical adjustments by the instructor, focusing instead on helping participants tune into their internal experiences and make choices based on their felt sense of their bodies.⁷ This approach is especially beneficial for those who have experienced trauma, because it helps rebuild the connection between mind and body and fosters a sense of agency and control.

Example: iSAFE recognized that speaking about FGM/C directly was ineffective and by starting with yoga sessions, participants gradually became more comfortable. Over time, as trust and comfort were built, they were more at ease to discuss FGM/C.

⁷ Psych Central. (n.d.). *What is trauma-informed yoga?* <https://psychcentral.com/health/what-is-trauma-informed-yoga#how-its-different>



iSAFE Trauma-Informed Yoga

In-Person Event Considerations

Safe Spaces: Ensure the event venue is welcoming and safe. This includes considering privacy, comfort, and accessibility.

Culturally Sensitive Atmosphere: When organizing in-person events, pay attention to cultural nuances, such as appropriate food choices that respect the dietary practices of the community.

Holistic Well-Being and Follow-Up: Address the holistic well-being of participants by including elements of mental health support where needed. Plan for follow-up interactions after the event to gather feedback and offer continued support.

Online Event Considerations

Safe Digital Spaces: Ensure the online platform is secure, user friendly, and accessible to all participants. This includes being mindful of cultural differences in communication styles and providing language support if needed.

Supportive Measures: Send care packages or digital gift cards to enhance the virtual experience and make participants feel comfortable and welcomed.

Engagement and Interaction: Use interactive tools like polls, Q&A sessions, and breakout rooms to foster engagement and build connections among participants.

Hybrid Event Considerations

For hybrid events, integrate elements from in-person and virtual formats to create a cohesive and inclusive experience. Considering the unique logistics and support required for each format will facilitate a smoother transition between event formats.

Gathering and Implementing Feedback



After all the planning is done, it is time to put everything into action. Monitoring how your event unfolds is crucial, because it allows you to adapt to any unexpected challenges that may arise. This phase of real-time monitoring involves closely observing how many people attend, gauging their level of engagement, and identifying which parts of the program resonate well with the audience. Keep track of these observations using simple methods like taking notes or using basic digital tools. This information is invaluable as it helps pinpoint what is working and what may need adjustment.

Be ready to make changes on the spot if things are not going as planned. This could range from addressing last-minute logistical issues to altering the content delivery in response to participant feedback or resolving unforeseen technical problems. The ability to adapt quickly is key to managing any event.

To help you see the bigger picture of what went well and what did not, it is beneficial to collect insights during and after the event. During the event, encourage people to give their thoughts and reactions, and this can be as easy as asking them directly how they feel things are going or having a suggestion box. Opting to distribute [simple surveys or feedback forms](#) may allow you to gather more structured responses from everyone involved.

Listening and adjusting based on feedback shows that you value the participants' experiences and are dedicated to continuous improvement. This not only helps in refining your approach for future events but also strengthens community trust and engagement. By consistently applying what you learn from each event, you reinforce community buy-in and lay a solid foundation for your organization's ongoing efforts.

Examples of Questions on Post-Event Evaluation Feedback Forms

1. Overall, how satisfied were you with this event?
2. I learned new information from this event.
3. I gained knowledge from this event that I plan to implement in my work.
4. What was beneficial about this event?
5. What could be improved for future events?
6. What topics would you like to see in future events?

Click below to view a clip where presenters discuss how they get feedback from people who attend their events.



You can view the [full webinar here](#).

Considerations After Programming

As programs, activities, or events conclude, organizations can consider some unique elements regarding the continued support of their clients or participants:

Follow-Up Care: Important for fostering lasting connections and encouraging continued involvement, particularly for participants who may initially hesitate to get involved, follow-up can play a key role in building a strong community support network. This may include periodic check-ins, offering resources or referrals as needed, and ensuring access to continued support services.

Organizational Capacity: Limited organizational capacity, whether due to funding constraints or resource availability, can impact the activities you are able to implement after a program ends. These limitations should not be viewed as failures, but rather as the realities of working within certain constraints. Understanding this early on helps manage expectations and reduces stress for organizers and participants.

By integrating these considerations throughout the programming phase, organizations can move toward having a lasting connection to the communities they serve, enhancing the sustainability of organizational programs.

Closing Thoughts

We hope you find this toolkit valuable and insightful in your efforts to engage with communities and survivors impacted by FGM/C. We understand that some sections may resonate more deeply with your organization than others. Our goal is not to prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach but to provide adaptable resources that you can tailor to your unique context. Take what makes sense for your organization, and feel free to modify the strategies to best fit your needs. Remember, effective engagement is about being flexible and responsive to the specific dynamics of your community. We encourage you to use this toolkit as a foundational guide and adapt it as necessary to foster meaningful and impactful engagement.

Thank you for your commitment to this important work.

Resources

To provide comprehensive support and information on FGM/C, we recommend exploring the extensive resources available through the US End FGM/C Network. Following are some highlighted categories and examples to guide you:

Advocacy Resources

- [Impact of Legislation on the Anti-FGM/C Movement in the United States](#)
- [Building Movements, Building Power: Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation by 2030 Through Social Movements](#)

Survivor Resources

- [Patient Self-Advocacy Tool](#)
- [Asian Women's Shelter - Support Line for FGC Survivors](#)

Educational Materials

- [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services FGM/C Brochure](#)
- [A Necessary Conversation: Debunking Religious Justifications for FGM/C](#)

Youth and Adolescent Engagement

- [Approaches to Discussing FGM/C with Youth Resource](#)

Male Engagement

- [FGM/C Educational Toolkit](#)

Training Resources

- [FGM/C 101 for Social Workers](#)

Research and Reports

- [FGM/C in the United States](#)
- [Critical Intersections with FGM/C](#)

For detailed information and to access these resources and more, please visit the [US End FGM/C Network Resources Page](#).

Additional Resource



sahiyo
United Against Female Genital Cutting

RTI
INTERNATIONAL

Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending FGM/C

📅 Monday Mar 18, 2024 ⌚ 9:00AM PT / 12:00PM ET

Mariya Taher
Moderator

Breanne Lash
Panelist

Wonder Guannu
Panelist

Samman Masud
Panelist

Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending Female Genital Cutting (FGC) Webinar

On March 18, 2024, Sahiyo, in partnership with RTI, hosted a webinar titled “Pathways to Progress: Community Engagement in Ending Female Genital Cutting (FGC)” to discuss the role of community engagement in prevention efforts to raise awareness on FGM/C and support communities impacted by it. Speakers included Mariya Taher (Sahiyo U.S.), Samman Masud (Sahiyo U.S.), Wonder Guannu (ACANA), and Breanne Lash (NSDI). Throughout the webinar, speakers uplifted their organization’s examples of effective outreach and education through various engagement strategies with individuals and communities impacted by FGM/C.

Click here to view the [full webinar](#).

To see the full playlist of clips shared through the toolkit, go to <https://bit.ly/CommunityEngagementVideos>.

About the Toolkit Developers

Leading Organizations



[Sahiyo U.S.](#)

Sahiyo U.S. is dedicated to empowering Asian and other communities to end FGM/C and create positive social change. By working toward an FGM/C-free world, Sahiyo U.S. aims to recognize and emphasize the values of consent and a child's/woman's right over her own body, and to enable a culture in which female sexuality is not feared or suppressed but embraced as normal. We use collaborative grassroots campaigns, social mobilization, and storytelling techniques to train communities to build a critical mass of community-based voices against FGM/C and lead the change to end it. We also partner with frontline professionals (e.g., healthcare providers) to create culturally sensitive systems of care for survivors, and partner with government officials to address policy-level change. Sahiyo U.S. is the Bohra Gujarati word for "saheliyo," or "friends," and reflects the organization's mission to engage in dialogue with the community to find a collective solution toward ending FGM/C or khatna.

[RTI International](#)



RTI International is an independent, nonprofit research institute dedicated to improving the human condition. RTI combines scientific rigor and technical expertise in social and laboratory sciences, engineering, and international development to deliver solutions to critical needs of clients worldwide. RTI is the training and technical assistance provider for the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Addressing FGM/C program. Through this project, RTI supports recipients of OVC funding in building or enhancing community response to address the needs of individuals who have experienced or are at risk of FGM/C. RTI does so by providing individualized coaching, material review, trainings, and connections with field experts.



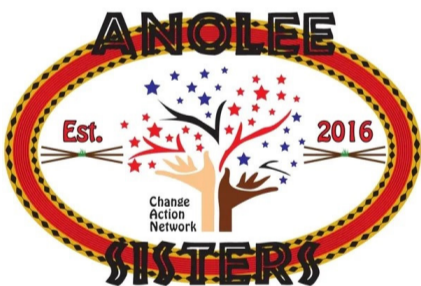
[African Cultural Alliance of North America \(ACANA\)](#)

The African Cultural Alliance of North America helps refugees, immigrant families, and all other residents of Philadelphia access legal, health, and social services. It places a special focus on women, children, youth, and the elderly in their resettlement process in Pennsylvania.



[African Family Health Organization \(AFAHO\)](#)

African Family Health Organization is a community-based organization that provides health, social, and educational services to African and Caribbean immigrants and refugees in the greater Philadelphia area. Using a unique peer-support model, it helps individuals overcome social determinants, build community, and access the resources needed to thrive.



[Anolee Sisters](#)

Anolee Sisters is a nonprofit organization dedicated to working with women from the African diaspora. It aims to acknowledge past trauma, embrace healing, build connections, and create systems and supports to effect change in global and local communities.



[Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation \(GWPF\)](#)

Founded in 2010, the Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to ending violence and injustices against women and girls. Its mission is to empower women and girls through education to eradicate GBV, especially FGM/C. Its programs focus on two main components: rehabilitation and prevention.



[International Survivors And Family Empowered \(iSAFE\)](#)

International Survivors And Family Empowered aims to improve the physical and mental health of immigrant and refugee survivors through trauma-informed programming.

[Nile Sisters Development Initiative \(NSDI\)](#)

Nile Sisters Development Initiative's mission is to educate, support, and offer training to refugee and immigrant women and their families to help them overcome barriers to social and economic self-reliance.

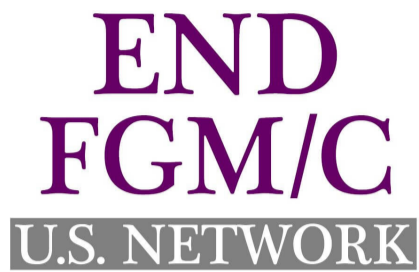
[Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families](#)

Sauti Yetu ("Our Voice" in Swahili) is a community-based social service organization dedicated to mobilizing African immigrant women and their families to improve their quality of life, strengthen their families, and develop their communities in the United States, starting in New York City.

[Silence Speaks](#)

Silence Speaks surfaces first-person narratives of struggle, courage, and transformation, ensuring these stories play an instrumental role in promoting gender equality, health, and human rights worldwide. They use participatory media, popular education, and testimonio practices to support the telling and witnessing of stories that often remain unspoken and unheard.





[The US End FGM/C Network](#)

The Network's mission is to eliminate FGM/C by connecting, supporting, elevating, and advocating on behalf of and with diverse U.S. stakeholders engaged in prevention, education, and care.



[US Together Inc.](#)

US Together's mission is to coordinate, organize, and initiate services for refugees and immigrants through education, advocacy, support services, information, referrals, and networking opportunities. It aims to strengthen the community and promote international understanding through intercultural exchange.

Contributions to the Toolkit

The development of this toolkit was made possible through the invaluable contributions of these supporting organizations. Interviews with key members provided critical insights and firsthand experiences that shaped the content. Additionally, many organizations participated in a webinar event hosted in relation to this toolkit, which fostered collaborative discussions and insights for addressing potential gaps in the ideas shared. These organizations also reviewed the content to ensure accuracy and relevance and generously shared photos from their organizations to visually enrich the toolkit. Their collective efforts and dedication to ending FGM/C have been instrumental in creating a comprehensive and effective resource for communities and individuals working to address this issue.

Individual Acknowledgements

Angela Peabody, [GWPF](#)

Breanne Lash, [NSDI](#)

Dianne Uwayo, [AFAHO](#)

Farduus Ahmed, [iSAFE](#)

Amy Hill, [Silence Speaks](#)

Hana Abdelbaki, [US Together](#)

Katharine Conroy, [Sauti Yetu](#)

Rufo Jiru, [Anolee Sisters](#)

Wonder Guannu and Nettie Johnson, [ACANA](#)

Caitlin LeMay, [The US End FGM/C Network](#)

Appendix A: Organization Profiles

African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA)

Mission Statement: “...to help refugees, immigrant families, and all other residents of Philadelphia access legal, health, and other social services with a special focus on women, children, youth, and the elderly in their resettlement process in Pennsylvania. Additionally, ACANA is committed to fostering community development by driving structural change and transforming communities. We work to empower individuals, strengthen community infrastructure, and implement programs that lead to sustainable, long-term improvements in the quality of life for all residents.”

About the Organization: ACANA is a nonprofit organization based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Founded in 1999, ACANA has dedicated itself to providing social, health, and legal services to African immigrants, with a special focus on women, children, youth, and the elderly. The organization is deeply involved in community outreach and education, including raising awareness about FGM/C and working to drive impactful behavioral changes through education.

Populations/Geographies Served: ACANA serves African and Caribbean immigrants in the Philadelphia area and surrounding communities.

Learn more about ACANA in the clip linked below.



Programs: ACANA offers various programs that better the outreach and impact for the community it they are working in., sSome of the programs include these including:

- **Legal Services:** ACANA provides essential legal assistance to community members who may not have access to affordable legal services. This program is especially beneficial because as it often offers pro bono or reduced-fee legal help. ACANA combines social work and psychological approaches to ensure clients receive comprehensive support tailored to their needs. The program specializes in areas such as immigration, naturalization, adjustment of status and green card renewal, asylum, and refugee resettlement.
- **Health Department:** ACANA's health initiatives include Project Baobab and Mental Health Case Management, both designed to address the specific health needs of their the community.
- **Project Baobab:** This project focuses on providing sensitive and educational information about FGM/C and offers resources to medical professionals on how to support survivors. Project Baobab helps survivors of FGM/C and equips community members and healthcare providers with the knowledge to offer appropriate support.
- **Mental Health Case Management:** ACANA provides a safe space for the immigrant community to discuss mental health issues free of judgment. This program includes referrals to free mental health services, ensuring that individuals and families can access the support they need.

Contact

ACANA

<https://acanaus.org/contact/>

info@acanaus.org

(215) 729-8225, ext. 105

5530 Chester Ave.

Philadelphia, PA 19143

African Family Health Organization (AFAHO)

Mission Statement: “To address an unmet need among members of the African and Caribbean immigrant and refugee communities in the greater Philadelphia area who experience difficulties accessing health and human services due to cultural, geographic, linguistic, and other barriers.”

About the Organization: AFAHO was founded in 2005 by Tiguida Kaba, who was working as an African and Haitian healthcare coordinator with a focus on HIV/AIDS care. Kaba and AFAHO aim to address the unmet needs of their communities, specifically related to health and human service needs that may be difficult for their communities to access due to cultural, geographical, linguistic, or other barriers. AFAHO tries to be a “one-stop shop,” meaning that it addresses the entire issue at hand, which has led AFAHO to help survivors of FGM/C navigate related health and mental health issues to ensure the holistic well-being of everyone in the community.

Populations/Geographies Served: AFAHO serves African and Caribbean immigrants and refugees in greater Philadelphia.

Programs: AFAHO has many programs that aim to address the needs of their communities, including these:

- **Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH):** This program aims to address any sexual health needs of individuals that AFAHO serves, primarily female sexual health needs. This program includes resources for maternal child health, sexually transmitted disease treatment and prevention, and FGM/C. This includes helping clients find doctors who are educated on FGM/C, increase awareness about health issues that impact the communities AFAHO works with, and creating support groups for women facing similar health issues.
 - » **Clinic:** As a part of the other health resources that AFAHO provides through its SRH program, AFAHO works with local hospitals for healthcare workers to come in once a month to work with community members. This program educates healthcare professionals on the health risks associated with FGM/C that are often ignored in medical training. Furthermore, the clinic provides a safe space where survivors are already comfortable to help with the anxiety many survivors face when seeking medical care. Additionally, the clinic can help fill out the necessary paperwork for survivors who are seeking asylum as a part of their immigration.

- **African Youth Empowerment Program (AYEP):** AFAHO began its AYEPE to begin work with youth community members. After a local high school reached out asking for help to bridge the cultural gap between African students, AFAHO began AYEPE as an after-school program that provided youth with a variety of services such as college preparation, homework help, and haircuts. Through empowering youth, AFAHO has since been able to take on young women as ambassadors to work on educational outreach and help run workshops around the topic of FGM/C. The program has fired up many young women to tackle the issue of FGM/C and educate their peers on the topic.
- **Adult Education:** AFAHO provides many classes to help address the needs of its communities. This includes English as a second language classes, literacy classes, and digital classes, which all aim to help individuals access more resources. These classes are especially important because skill levels in these areas can vary a lot in immigrant communities.

Contact

AFAHO

<https://afaho.org/>

(215) 546-1232

5400 Grays Ave., 2nd Floor

Philadelphia, PA 19143

Anolee Sisters

Mission Statement: “Educate and raise awareness within the African diaspora community.”

About the Organization: Anolee Sisters is a nonprofit organization dedicated to working with women from the African diaspora. It acknowledges past trauma, embraces healing, builds connections, and creates systems and supports to effect change in global and local communities. It focuses on addressing the needs of women who have faced significant challenges due to immigration, trauma, and cultural displacement.

Populations/Geographies Served: Anolee Sisters supports immigrant and refugee women from the African diaspora, particularly the Oromo and broader Ethiopian communities. Its work is focused domestically, in the United States, and abroad.

Programs: Anolee Sisters has many programs that aim to address the needs of its communities, including these:

- **FGM/C Support Groups:** Anolee Sisters holds support groups for those impacted by FGM/C. In these groups, survivors can share their stories and get advice and support from one another. Nonsurvivors from impacted communities are also invited to these groups to learn more about the issue and how to best support survivors in their lives and help in advocacy.
- **Immigration Assistance:** Anolee Sisters helps women navigate the complexities of immigration processes, including applying for visas, green cards, and asylum. It provides legal support and guidance, ensuring that women understand their rights and options.
- **Healthcare Access:** Anolee Sisters provides support to access medical care and mental health services, connecting women with healthcare providers and facilitating appointments. It offers assistance in understanding healthcare systems, insurance options, and available medical services.

- **Housing and Food Security:** Anolee Sisters assists with securing stable housing and food resources, helping women find safe and affordable housing options. It connects families with food assistance programs and resources to ensure they have access to nutritious food.
- **Support for Special Needs:** Anolee Sisters offers assistance for families with children who have special needs, providing resources and support tailored to these families' unique challenges. It helps navigate educational and healthcare systems, ensuring that children with special needs receive appropriate services and support.

Contact

Anolee Sisters

<https://anoleesisters.org/>

Rufo Jiru

info@anolesisters.org

Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation (GWPF)

Mission Statement: “We empower women and girls through education and fight Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and other gender-based violence.”

About the Organization: Global Woman P.E.A.C.E (People Everywhere, All Created Equal) Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to advocating against FGM and other forms of GBV. With a focus on the United States and West Africa, GWPF believes in the fundamental right of individuals to have control over their bodies and health. The organization strives to end FGM worldwide through education, resources, and advocacy.

Populations/Geographies Served: GWPF primarily focuses on women and girls in the United States and West Africa. However, it is committed to educating and mobilizing anyone willing to stand against FGM.

Programs: GWPF offers various programs that better the outreach and impact for the community it is working in, including these:

- **Rehabilitation:** GWPF provides comprehensive rehabilitation for FGM survivors, addressing psychological and physical needs. Services include counseling, legal representation, physical therapy, and more.
 - » **Support Groups:** GWPF facilitates online support groups for FGM survivors, led by a psychologist. These groups provide a safe space for survivors to share their experiences and support each other through sensitive and constructive conversations.
 - » **Restorative Surgery:** For survivors experiencing pain and discomfort, GWPF offers financial support to individuals interested in vaginal restorative surgery. This procedure, available at a reduced cost of \$2,000, helps alleviate physical pain and significantly improves survivors' quality of life.

- **Funding Programs:** GWPF offers scholarship funding programs for students to help keep children in school and being educated.
 - » **Lisa C. Bruch Scholarship Fund:** Provides \$100 scholarships to young women and girls in Liberia, West Africa. This fund often covers annual tuition, books, and supplies, helping girls stay in school and continue their education.
 - » **Donald A. Strong Scholarship Fund:** Offers \$100 scholarships for young men and boys, covering the cost of books and supplies. This initiative encourages boys to join the conversation about FGM and promotes their education.
 - » **Sanitary Pads Campaign:** GWPF's Sanitary Pads Campaign aims to ship at least 1,000 sanitary pads annually to Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. This campaign ensures that young girls and women have access to sanitary pads, enabling them to attend school consistently, even during their menstrual cycles.

Contact

GWPF

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International Institute of Minnesota (IIM)

Mission Statement: “We empower New Americans as they begin new lives and achieve their full potential. Our comprehensive services range from refugee resettlement and citizenship and immigration support to English education, college preparation, and workforce and leadership development. Since our founding in 1919, the Institute has been a pillar of support for New Americans as they journey to safety, stability, and success.”

About the Organization: IIM, or the International Institute of Minnesota, is an organization that works with immigrants and refugees to help them build lives in the States. Founded in 1919, IIM offers services that aim to support New Americans’ stability and success. IIM has been highly successful, with 94% of their clients who have applied for citizenship gaining acceptance.

Populations/Geographies Served: IIM serves New Americans in the state of Minnesota. This includes refugees and immigrants who want to build their lives in the United States. IIM has served clients using 28 different languages, across 111 countries, building a diverse staff and community. Community populations often fluctuate based on where the majority of migrants come from. Most recently, communities primarily come from Ethiopian and Somali populations, with significant ethnic groups of Oromo and Amhara populations.

Programs: IIM has many programs that aim to address the needs of their communities, including:

- **FGM/C Support Groups:** IIM holds support groups for those impacted by FGM/C. In these groups, survivors can share their stories and get advice and support from one another. Non-survivors from impacted communities are also invited to these groups in order to learn more about the issue and how to best support survivors in their lives and help in advocacy.
- **Educational Workshops:** IIM hosts different 6-week cohort workshops and various topics that their communities are interested in, such as FGM/C. At the completion of these workshops, participants receive gift certificates as part of the incentive to join. The ultimate goal of these workshops is to build a sense of community among women and for them to support one another moving forward

- **English Classes:** IIM provides many classes to help address the needs of their communities. This includes English as a Second Language classes and literacy classes which aim to help individuals obtain access to more resources. These classes are especially important since the level of language skills can vary a lot in immigrant communities.

Contact

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International Survivors And Family Empowered (iSAFE)

Mission Statement: “iSAFE’s mission is to promote health equity and reduce disparities among immigrant and refugee women, families, and communities. Our vision is that people are empowered to achieve well-being, which includes mental, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions.”

About the Organization: Fardus Ahmed, the founder and executive director of iSAFE, started the organization to provide culturally and linguistically responsive and trauma-informed mental health services to refugee and immigrant clients and their families. This organization specializes in helping clients overcome barriers when accessing healthcare in the areas of reproductive health (such as family planning, maternal health, and FGM/C), mental health and wellness, and domestic and gender violence. The organization aims to create a safe space that allows the community of survivors, women, youth, and families to interact in settings that facilitate comfort and build rapport for critical conversation and learning.

Populations/Geographies Served: iSAFE serves Eastern and Western African communities, including Somali, Ethiopian, Mali, Djibouti, Sudanese, and Oromo communities of immigrant and refugee survivors. Its work primarily revolves around female immigrants and refugees and their families.

Programs: iSAFE has many programs that aim to address the needs of its communities, including these:

- **Mental Health and Wellness Programs and Outreach:** iSAFE provides mental health and wellness support in several ways. It provides spaces for connection and healing like support groups or classes like yoga. iSAFE also provides additional resources to those who need them, including education and mental health services.
- **Digital Literacy Trainings:** iSAFE provides its community members with different training programs to increase skills when using online applications, from Zoom to WhatsApp. These trainings take place in one-on-one and small group sessions. Born out of the need for digital literacy during the pandemic, these trainings ensure that the community can access the many resources that iSAFE provides online, such as using interpretation on Zoom for accessibility.

Contact

iSAFE

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Nile Sisters Development Initiative (NSDI)

Mission Statement: “We educate, support, and offer training to refugee and immigrant women and their families to help them overcome barriers to social and economic self-reliance.”

About the Organization: Founded in 2001 in City Heights, San Diego, NSDI is a nonprofit organization that aims to educate, support, and offer training to women and their families to help them overcome social and economic self-reliance barriers. As a part of these efforts, NSDI has created the Women’s Health Program, which addresses the sensitive issue of FGM/C within the communities that it serves.

Populations/Geographies Served: NSDI serves refugee and immigrant families in the San Diego area, with clients coming from diverse backgrounds, including individuals from North African, Caribbean, and Arab nations.

Learn more about NSDI in the clip linked below.



Programs: NSDI has many programs that aim to address the needs of its communities, including these:

- **Women’s Health Program:** The NSDI Women’s Health Program, launched in 2016, aims to address the sensitive issue of FGM/C within the communities served by NSDI. Given the taboo surrounding this topic, the program delicately approaches it by tailoring language to be nonstigmatizing and inclusive, ensuring individuals feel comfortable receiving education and intervention/prevention strategies. The primary goals are to provide services to those impacted by FGM/C, offer education to service providers, and engage in local advocacy efforts. Staff, volunteers, and select community stakeholders primarily support the program through outreach events, peer support groups, case management, individual counseling, outside referrals, educational training, and workshops for clients and service providers.
 - » **Coffee Circles:** As a part of its Women’s Health Program, NSDI hosts Coffee Circles led by licensed marriage and family therapists. NSDI uses Coffee Circles as a way to make therapy more accessible to the community. Topics of the meetings are not predetermined, allowing the topics of conversation to be flexible based on participants’ most pressing need, and, if a conversation is found to lead toward a discussion on FGM/C, only then does the facilitator engage on this topic.
- **Employment Facilitation and Family Education and Advocacy Programs (Vocational Training):** NSDI offers employment facilitation services to address clients’ primary needs, often centered on achieving financial self-sufficiency. To better understand each individual’s background and assess their eligibility for vocational training programs, NSDI requires applicants to complete a screening tool. Once an individual has been identified as being eligible for vocational training, NSDI can help place them in programs that work best for their vocational goals.

Contact

NSDI

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Sahiyo U.S.

Mission Statement: “Our mission is to empower Asian and other communities to end female genital cutting and create positive social change through dialogue, education, and collaboration based on community involvement.”

About the Organization: Sahiyo was formed in 2015 as an advocacy collective of South Asian and other survivors of female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female genital mutilation, to address the lack of acknowledgment of FGC as GBV and child abuse impacting U.S. women. Sahiyo empowers underrepresented communities to advocate for their inclusion within FGC discourse and supports them to create systemic change to end this centuries-long practice. Sahiyo uses collaborative grassroots campaigns and storytelling techniques to train communities to lead this change. Sahiyo also partners with frontline workers (i.e., healthcare providers) to create culturally sensitive systems of care for survivors and with the government to address policy-level change.

Populations/Geographies Served: Although Sahiyo U.S. aims to work with all communities impacted by FGC in the United States, it focuses on support to Asian communities, in recognition that many Asian and Pacific Islander communities and Middle East and North African communities are left out of the discourse on FGM/C. Thus, Sahiyo specializes its focus on these communities impacted by FGC and residing in the United States.

Programs: Sahiyo U.S. has many programs that aim to address the needs of its communities, including these:

- **Voices to End FGM/C:** Voices to End FGM/C, launched in 2018, is a joint partnership by Sahiyo and Silence Speaks that uses digital storytelling to elevate the conversation about FGM/C in the United States. This project has since brought together 82 survivors through workshops to surface their personal experiences of FGM/C. These stories have been shared widely through online distribution, screening events, and media articles.
- **Bhaiyo: Male Allies:** Launched on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM in 2021 to engage male-identifying individuals in the work to end FGC, the program works to achieve this goal by educating male-identifying individuals on how to support survivors of FGC and impacted communities and generating resources that raise awareness and advocacy.
- **Activists Retreats:** Every year, Sahiyo U.S. hosts an Activists Retreat to build a network and a support system of Bohra activists to advocate for the end of FGC. These retreats aim to create a safe space for individuals to learn more about the issue of FGC and build the capacity to engage in sustained post-retreat activism. The retreats allow activists to engage publicly or anonymously and have been growing to include individuals from all FGC-impacted communities.

- **Community Outreach and Education:** Sahiyo's community outreach and education efforts are focused on raising awareness and fostering dialogue to end FGC. Through community webinars, public meetings, and media campaigns, Sahiyo engages with diverse audiences to inform and empower individuals. Educational resources are created to support those impacted by FGC, raise awareness, and advocate for its elimination.
- **Training and Technical Assistance:** Sahiyo's training and technical assistance programs are designed to equip professionals and community leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively address FGC. They offer comprehensive training sessions for healthcare providers, social workers, educators, and activists, focusing on the health implications, legal aspects, and cultural sensitivity surrounding FGC. These programs include workshops, webinars, and interactive sessions that provide practical tools and strategies for prevention, support, and advocacy.
- **Research:** Knowing how research is critical to understanding the prevalence and impact of FGC, Sahiyo conducts innovative research to bridge the gap in data that exists on FGC globally. Sahiyo has pioneered major studies since its inception, including the first-ever global study on FGC in the Dawoodi Bohra community. In 2023, Sahiyo completed a project titled "Critical Intersections," which explores the intersection between FGC and other forms of oppression such as racism, Islamophobia, transphobia, and other forms of harm.
- **Policy Outreach, Education, and Advocacy:** Sahiyo supports policy work to address FGC at the global, national, state, and local levels. Sahiyo has been involved in two states' passage of new legislation around FGC, as well as three state coalitions working toward the same goal. Sahiyo works to ensure that policies and laws are informed by and created in partnership with communities impacted by FGC to achieve wide-scale abandonment of the practice and to support survivors.

Contact

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Sauti Yetu Center For African Women and Families

Mission Statement: “Our mission is to mobilize low-income or ‘no-income’ African immigrant women to improve the quality of their lives, strengthen their families, and develop their communities in the United States, starting in New York City.”

About the Organization: : Sauti Yetu is dedicated to empowering African immigrant women and families using a holistic approach that includes direct service delivery, education, and advocacy. The organization focuses on combating violence against women and access to healthcare, addressing issues such as early forced marriage, lack of education, and FGM/C. Sauti Yetu offers a wide range of services and programs tailored to meet the specific needs of these communities.

Populations/Geographies Served: Sauti Yetu primarily serves African immigrant women and their families, particularly those from West African, French, and Arabic-speaking backgrounds, living in New York City. The organization specializes in reaching youth in the community to support their education and help set them up for future success.

Programs: Sauti Yetu offers a range of outreach, education, and one-on-one services to improve wellness for the communities it serves. These include the following:

- **Outreach:** Sauti Yetu is active in the Bronx and larger New York City community, offering a range of outreach and referral services, as well as culturally and linguistically attuned health communications.
- **Youth Education:** Sauti Yetu provides educational programming for young adults, especially in the areas of SRH and FGM/C. It created the Aminah and Akeem workshop series specifically for Muslim youth with limited access to information about their bodies.
- **Direct Services:** Sauti Yetu offers social work, counseling, and comprehensive case management related to domestic violence, GBV, legal, and community health needs. These services are aimed at ensuring that each individual receives the support they need to thrive at home and in school and work settings. Sauti Yetu also partners with family justice centers in offering crisis intervention, emergency assistance, counseling, immigration assistance, shelter information, and more.

- **Preventing FGM/C:** Through [The Hands Project](#) and other initiatives, Sauti Yetu is dedicated to providing culturally attuned, trauma-informed, linguistically competent care to all those who are affected—directly or indirectly—by FGM/C. It provides resources, education, and counseling to help community members better understand how their bodies have been affected by FGM/C and access the care they need to support their physical, mental, emotional, and relationship health. It also provides education around topics of autonomy, voice, and choice, so those who want to speak up about FGM/C—especially individuals from communities where FGM/C is not a topic of open discussion—and help prevent the practice in their communities feel prepared to do so. Additionally, Sauti Yetu offers training for social service providers who work with those affected by FGM/C, so they can better provide holistic support for their own clients.

Contact

Sauti Yetu

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US Together Inc.

Mission Statement: “To coordinate, organize, and initiate services to refugees and immigrants through education, advocacy, support services, information, referrals, and networking opportunities to strengthen the community that we live in and to promote international understanding through intercultural exchange.”

About the Organization: Founded in 2003 in central Ohio, US Together began by serving Russian-speaking populations and quickly expanded to assist refugees from around the world. It offers services in Columbus, Cleveland, and Toledo, with a staff representing over 70 languages. Each year, the organization supports over 1,000 refugees as they start their new lives in America.

Populations/Geographies Served: US Together focuses its services and outreach on refugees and immigrants, including those from the former Soviet Union, Iran, Iraq, Burma, Bhutan, Eritrea, Somalia, Congo, Sudan, Burundi, and Rwanda.

Programs: US Together offers various programs that better the outreach to and impact on the community it is working in, including these:

- **Domestic Programs:** US Together offers a wide variety of domestic programs, ranging from civic integration, economic integration, linguistic integration, and social integration.
 - » **Access to Healthcare:** One of the essential services offered by US Together is improving access to healthcare for refugees and immigrants. Through integration programs, it connects clients with case managers who help them navigate the healthcare system and find affordable medical services in their area.
 - » **Youth Mentorship:** US Together’s youth mentorship program provides guidance and support to young refugees and immigrants, particularly those graduating from high school. The program offers resources and advice on various life paths, including higher education and career opportunities, to set them up for future success.

- **International Programs:** US Together offers various programs internationally to connect countries with one another to gain resources and outreach within their communities.
 - » **Cultural and Occupational Exchange Program:** This program assists individuals living abroad who wish to train in the United States. The program, lasting from 1 to 18 months, helps participants secure visas and find placements in their desired professional fields.
 - » **Global Partners Program:** This initiative connects foreign professionals with U.S. businesses. US Together aids these professionals in obtaining the necessary visas and supports their integration into their roles within the companies.
 - » **Cultural Exchange Intern Program:** Designed for recent graduates from foreign universities, this program helps participants gain professional experience in the United States. US Together assists with placement in relevant fields and secures valid visas for the duration of their stay.

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Appendix B: Digital Storytelling for Community Engagement

Introduction

Over the past 3 decades, a community-based practice known as digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful method for surfacing personal stories about sensitive health and social justice issues. Recognizing its potential for supporting human rights education and advocacy, the Silence Speaks program pioneered a trauma-informed approach to digital storytelling in the

mid-2000s and has led intensive, hands-on workshops in locations around the world. This appendix describes how the digital storytelling process can engage communities impacted by FGM/C, enhance the well-being of survivors, and build their skills for leadership and community action. It also discusses how the stories that digital storytelling workshop participants share and produce as short videos can be positioned as tools for mobilizing local communities to speak out about the need to end this harmful practice.



What is Digital Storytelling?

For the purposes of this toolkit, **“digital storytelling” refers to an intensive workshop that centralizes personal narrative and participatory media techniques.** The Silence Speaks digital storytelling curriculum draws from well-established traditions in the fields of popular education, oral history, and visual anthropology to train and work with small groups of people as they produce short, first-person videos documenting a range of lived experiences. We offer a supportive environment in which the process of creation is just as meaningful as the media created. Over the course of 3 or 4 consecutive days in person, or 15 to 20 hours of online classroom time, each workshop participant shares a story verbally with the group; crafts and audio-records a script; collects images (photos, artwork, video clips, etc.) with which to illustrate their story; and is guided through a computer tutorial that enables them, with facilitator assistance, to put together a finished piece.

The Silence Speaks digital storytelling model is highly flexible and can be adapted to suit specific story themes, language and literacy needs, and the cultural backgrounds of participants. **A typical workshop looks something like this:**

1

In preparation, participants are asked to **reflect on the story they wish to tell and collect flat images (photographs, letters, clippings, drawings, artwork, etc.) and video clips** to use in their stories.

2

After an **introductory presentation on fundamentals of storytelling** featuring sample digital stories and a discussion of their strengths, emotional impact, pacing, and overall effect, **each participant shares a story in a group story circle.**

3

Participants then work individually to prepare short scripts, record voiceover narration, and create and organize visual images for their stories.

4

A hands-on video editing tutorial enables participants to assemble their stories, and the workshop concludes with a screening and celebration of the completed videos.

In the weeks after the workshop, the videos are polished and post-produced, and participants receive final copies. They are asked to complete a story release, which stipulates that although they own their stories and can share them as they wish, they are giving permission to project partners to also share them in a variety of ways: online, in community screenings, as part of conferences and trainings, and so on. As plans for distributing stories are being made, Silence Speaks provides participants with opportunities to talk about their experiences in creating stories in dedicated spaces for one-on-one or group debriefing. We also offer additional emotional support for participants as needed, by connecting them to skilled counselors or support groups and community-based programs for ongoing support.

How Does Trauma-Informed Digital Storytelling Engage Participants?

Although trauma may happen to individuals, it is widely recognized as a social and political phenomenon, deeply influenced by the power dynamics that shape human interaction. At Silence Speaks, we define traumatic experience broadly to encompass violence, oppression, stigma, and marginalization occurring in the context of families, communities, institutions, or during political struggles and armed conflicts. We also recognize that rigid definitions of “trauma” can limit inquiry and unfairly pathologize individuals and groups. Our approach is to support workshop participants in identifying themselves and describing their experience as they see fit. Regardless of how it is defined, however, what is clear is that trauma can have lasting emotional and physical effects.

Common sense and research by psychologists and public health experts suggest that when a person is in pain, they are generally better served by seeking an outlet than by holding the suffering inside. Having access to a safe and supportive environment in which to write down or verbalize what happened can often help people make sense of traumatic experiences and begin to disconnect from outdated “victim” identities or from environmental triggers that have lingered long after the danger or pain has passed. Studies show that a combination of descriptive writing (e.g., what happened to me...) and reflective writing (e.g., how it affected me...) can have the most significant positive impact on well-being. The Silence Speaks digital storytelling workshop method encourages participants to blend these two approaches as they narrate and craft their stories.

As is true of art therapy practices, our digital storytelling workshops enable people to access multiple ways of conveying meaning to represent their experiences. Although talking and writing are crucial, these methods do not tap into the visual and auditory modes of perception that come into play when we hear music or view still and moving images. For many workshop participants, looking at an old scrapbook, taking a photograph, or drawing a picture can be a profound starting point for crafting a story. If a traumatic experience rendered someone speechless in the past, a chance to not only describe



what happened, but also develop a visual portrait of the experience can be transformative. This is particularly true for those who were very young and therefore preverbal when trauma occurred. Although participants have wide latitude to develop their visuals, we ask that they avoid reproducing the kind of graphic imagery often used to sensationalize trauma and violence in mainstream media.

Survivors of trauma are often challenged in making meaningful connections with others. During and after the trauma experience, they may have been forced to ignore everything and everyone other than their instincts to maintain basic functioning or simply stay alive. The enduring legacy of this “blocking out” can take shape as dissociation, a state that involves compartmentalizing certain thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, or memories. When people dissociate, they are distanced from their embodied and emotional interactions. Digital storytelling workshops offer a space of safety in which participants can at their own pace begin to let down their guard and be vulnerable in the presence of others. Silence Speaks bring groups together with skillful facilitation and uses experiential methods, including the hands-on practices of participatory media making, to support participants in moving toward integration: a state of being grounded in the body, being in touch with (rather than fearing, avoiding, or fixating on) feelings and thoughts, and being open to and available for connection and intimacy with others.

Although telling one’s story can be healing, participating in collective action at the community level also plays an important role in nurturing recovery. We recognize that the journey from “healing” to “recovery” is not necessarily linear—some people come to Silence Speaks digital storytelling workshops after years of counseling and no involvement in community initiatives; others are seasoned organizers who wish to make stories as a way of addressing personal pain that has emerged in the context of their political work. The work supports individual transformation while simultaneously building the resilience of participants for involvement in social justice movements.

Collective action begins with individual action, as people make connections between their own lives and the lives of others. We work closely with workshop participants to ensure that the social and political determinants of individual “experience” are brought out in their stories. Our workshops offer wonderful opportunities to examine experiences and issues across chasms of difference—cultural, linguistic, political, racial, gendered, age related, and so on. As participants allow themselves to be vulnerable in sharing their own stories, they gain insight into perspectives and emotions they may not previously have considered or felt. In this way, the workshop experience builds solidarity across groups and encourages leadership and civic engagement.

How Can Digital Stories Engage Communities?

Beyond the community engagement that happens in the context of a digital storytelling workshop, personal stories created as short videos are immensely useful tools for promoting learning and awareness. Videos produced through the digital storytelling process stand out for their directness of emotional expression. Facts and timelines and third-person perspectives by “experts” can be useful in describing an issue or problem, but personal stories, when properly contextualized, can bring to life the realities of how individuals experience that issue or problem, day to day. When people see and hear a

story that addresses silenced or stigmatized topics, their conception of what can and cannot be said or done shifts, and this is where behavior and social norm change begins.

With careful facilitation, we have found that community story screenings and trainings can generate deep and strategic discussion about systemic inequalities, as viewers consider how they may be affected or implicated in particular issues. Such screenings can function as an opportunity for communities to map out strategies for mobilizing people to take action for justice. This work can be supported by sharing stories across multiple social media platforms and broadcasting them on local radio, to reinforce what people have seen and heard at screening events.

Sharing Stories for Maximum Impact

It is important to recognize that videos portraying trauma stories can be difficult to watch, both for people not accustomed to directly acknowledging or confronting sensitive topics and for those who have been directly affected by those topics. Whether stories are being shared online or in public settings, it is important to prepare storytellers for the experience of having their work shared and to do your best to make screening spaces feel safe and open. Following are suggestions for how to achieve this, adapted from our Silence Speaks work over the years.



Have a conversation with the storytellers about what it might be like for their work to be shared publicly.

Sharing a story with a group of peers in a supportive workshop environment is one thing, but it is another thing altogether to share one's story with the public, whether online or in person. As noted previously, our story release process for Silence Speaks allows storytellers to themselves identify where and how their stories may be shared. Even when storytellers have given permission, we believe it is crucial to prepare them in advance for the possibility that some viewers may not agree or approve of how they have chosen to depict their experience. We ask them to reflect on what negative or critical comments they might receive, and we support them in exploring how they can best navigate their feelings and responses in ways that protect their mental health and well-being.

Know where NOT to show stories.

We do not recommend showing videos about highly sensitive topics as a background image or on a side table at a large public event. Close attention to the audio content is key to understanding Silence Speaks stories, and in settings that are noisy and distracting, they simply do not come through. The serious nature of trauma stories suggests they will be most successfully shared in closed, structured settings, where an audience's attention can be captured fully and where healthy discussions can emerge.

Plan well in advance.

Whatever your purpose, it is always important to be clear in your outreach process about where people should go for the viewing, when they need to arrive, and how much time the event will take. Give lots of advance notice about when the event will happen as well, and remind people about the details several times beforehand. Know your space, and do a test run of all equipment to make sure things work properly.

Be aware of support services.

Be prepared to serve as a support person during the event and identify available support or advocacy services that audience members can be referred to afterward. You may want to develop a handout of relevant local resources.

Establish an open space for discussion.

Make the room as comfortable as possible for everyone (including yourself). Situating chairs or cushions so that everyone can see the stories and each other during discussion is a good start, as is beginning with games or icebreaking activities.

Set ground rules.

Working with an audience to establish ground rules for an event promotes inclusive dialogue. Ask your audience for their ideas about rules, and share your own favorites, such as respect, openness, and confidentiality. This will help set the tone of the discussion.

Practice empathy.

You will need to know how to work with feelings that might come up in response to the stories. Think about what you will say if someone in the audience shares their own story. Appropriate responses might be, “Thank you so much for telling us your own story—I’m really sorry that happened to you... how can we support you right now?” or “I’m so glad you shared that with us, because it shows that (fill in the blank)...” or “That’s a very touching story. Thank you for bringing it up because it relates to what we’ve seen in the digital story,” and so on. Always remember to validate people’s experiences and relate them back to the discussion.

Practice active listening.

Active listening means helping people feel that they are being understood and truly heard. It is a way of showing people that their own ideas and feelings are critical to their ability to find solutions to their problems. Practice active listening by using body language to show interest and understanding, using your face to show interest and reflect what is being said, paying attention to the speaker’s body language (as a way of listening not only to what is said but also to how it is said), and summarizing comments or questions to clarify that what has been said is what you heard.

Try to involve everyone

Be sure to pay attention to who is dominating the discussion and who is not contributing. If someone is very quiet, you might try to involve them by asking a direct question. But remember that people have different reasons for being quiet—they may be thinking deeply, or they may feel shy, triggered by the material, or threatened. If someone is very talkative, you can gently remind them to stand back and allow others to participate in the discussion.

Know how to handle when people are triggered.

As a facilitator, you are urged to begin discussions of sensitive Silence Speaks stories by acknowledging that it can be difficult to witness the pain of storytellers and suggesting ways that people can take care of themselves. For instance, some may need to step away from the group for a moment to gather their thoughts, cry, or pray. Others may benefit from slow, deep breathing or other grounding strategies. Introducing a small ritual into the discussion (such as together wishing the storytellers healing, strength, comfort, and justice) may also help.

Vary your presentation and discussion methods.

Most meaningful conversations happen among smaller groups. Be sure to offer a variety of ways for people to connect with one another. Some discussion can work with the entire audience, if it is large, but you will also want to divide people into pairs or groups of three or four, so everyone has a chance to respond to what they have seen.

Deal appropriately with conflict or difficult people.

Disagreement is healthy and should be welcomed, not discouraged. It is often through disagreement with others that we come to better understand our own thoughts and feelings. Conflict, on the other hand, is not healthy. It drains energy from an exploration of issues and feeds into the defense of fixed positions. Managing conflict is an important task for facilitators. If you are not comfortable with this role, find someone to work with who is.

Evaluate what worked and what might be improved.

Allow time at your event to assess people's reactions. Whether you brainstorm what worked and what could be changed the next time, or whether you develop a short written survey to collect information on what people gained from the event and what they plan to do as a result, you will learn a lot about how you can improve future screenings.

Appendix C: The Hands Project by Sauti Yetu—Engaging Youth in FGM/C Programs



When Sauti Yetu began developing [The Hands Project](#) workshops/ discussion sessions for youth impacted by FGM/C, it was clear that unique methods for engagement would be necessary for success, not just because of the sensitivity of the topic of FGM/C, but also because it was

the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. To “meet community members where they were,” programs needed to be available in online and in-person formats. However, planning for both formats came with a big question: when meeting online, how can we ensure exceptional safety, support, and interactivity for participants with whom we are not sharing a physical space? With community input, The Hands Project team addressed this question in several ways:

- **Community Guidelines:** All of Sauti Yetu’s FGM/C programs begin with a discussion of guidelines to which each participant consents. These guidelines encompass topics of participation, comfort, respect for the uniqueness of each individual’s experience, that there are no right or wrong answers, and self-care.
- **Counselor Participation:** At each of Sauti Yetu’s FGM/C workshops, an FGM/C social worker or counselor is present. This individual is introduced at the beginning of each session so that participants are aware of her presence and know how to contact her during or after the session if they would like additional support. Additionally, during virtual sessions, the facilitator lets all participants know that if they exit the online forum (i.e., Zoom room) without letting a facilitator know verbally or privately in chat, the counselor will follow up just to ensure that they are OK.
- **Pre-Discussion Worksheet:** To minimize risk of participant distress, which could be induced during discussions of highly sensitive or potentially triggering topics or questions, facilitators give everyone a worksheet at the beginning of the workshop. Participants are given time to reflect on the questions that will be asked later and make private notes if helpful, so they can prepare for conversations and determine their desired level of sharing.
- **Artistic Representations:** During development of The Hands Project, Sauti Yetu worked with female African illustrators to develop artistic renderings and anatomical drawings of each type of FGM/C. The impetus for this approach was to ensure that survivors have control over what they see as they are learning about FGM/C—if they are not ready for more clinical representations of FGM/C, they can engage with only illustrated explanations. During the workshops, only illustrations are shown to minimize the risk of trauma or discomfort.

Approaches such as these, which focus on ensuring that a comprehensive and consistent level of trauma-informed support is available regardless of program setting, can help youth fully engage and interact with their peers, themselves, and the topic of FGM/C.

