



sahiyo

United Against Female Genital Cutting

**Activists Retreat:
Impact Report**

2018 - 2022

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
About Sahiyo	
About the Dawoodi Bohras	
About the Activists Retreats	
Activists Retreat History	
Program Goals	
Attendees	
Sahiyo India: Activists Retreats	10
Retreat Design	11
Before the Retreat	
During the Retreat	
After the Retreat	
Attendees	21
Overall	
Individual Retreats	
Program Outcomes & Impact	26
Evaluation	
Overall Outcomes & Impact	
Post-Retreat Advocacy Examples	
Lessons Learned	29
Virtual v. In-Person Retreat	
Attendance	
Involving Men	
Future Recommendations	31
Appendix	32
Retreat Reports	
Published Blogs	
Retreat Evaluations	
Acknowledgments and Report Design Credit	34

INTRODUCTION

About Sahiyo

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 (FGM), to address the lack of acknowledgment around FGC as a global form of gender-based violence and child abuse. We utilize collaborative grassroots campaigns and storytelling techniques to train members of FGC-practicing communities in leading the demand for widespread abandonment; work with frontline professionals (i.e. healthcare providers) to create culturally-sensitive systems of care for survivors; and partner with government officials to address policy-level change.

Originally one entity, Sahiyo split into two legal entities in 2019: Sahiyo U.S. and Sahiyo India. Both entities continue to empower communities left out of the discourse on FGC to create systemic change and abandon this centuries-long practice.

Sahiyo's mission is to empower Asian and other communities to end FGC and create positive social change through dialogue, education, and collaboration based on community involvement.

The following report depicts the work of Sahiyo U.S., unless otherwise noted.

About the Dawoodi Bohras

The Dawoodi Bohras are a religious denomination of about one million followers within the Ismā'īlī branch of Shia Islam. Their largest numbers reside in India, Pakistan, Yemen, East Africa, and the Middle East, with a growing presence across Europe, North America, South East Asia, and Australia. Their leader is known as the Al-Dai-Al-Mutlaq. For over 400 years, the leader has been based out of India, including the current leader of the mainstream faction, the 53rd Dai, His Holiness Dr. Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin. In 2016, Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin [stated that FGC should continue](#)¹ in countries such as India, where the practice has not been made illegal, and should continue in secret in countries where it is illegal like the United States. A rival faction of Bohras led by Syedna Taher Fakhruddin stated that FGC is wrong but separated it from the practice of khatna.²

[He claimed that khatna should not be performed on minor girls](#),³ though it could be done to a grown woman with her consent.

There are several other Bohra sects such as Alvi and Suleimani Bohras that have been reported to continue FGC on girls.

For the first time since the 1996 federal law on FGC in the U.S. was passed, a U.S. doctor was charged for performing FGC on minor girls in Michigan in 2017. This female doctor was from the Bohra community and born in the U.S. The arrest made headlines and broke misconceptions about where and to whom FGC occurs. In 2021, another Bohra woman from Texas was arrested for FGC-related charges.

¹ Bohra leader upholds female circumcision in countries where it is not banned - <https://scroll.in/article/809463/bohra-leader-upholds-female-genital-mutilation-in-countries-where-it-is-not-banned>

² Dawoodi Bohras use the term 'khatna', translated as circumcision, to refer to the removal of the prepuce (or hood) from the genitalia of both boys and girls.

³ Bring legislation to ban female genital mutilation, religious leader writes to PM Modi. <https://theprint.in/india/bring-legislation-to-ban-female-genital-mutilation-bohra-muslim-leader-writes-to-pm-modi/1342955/>

About FGC

Female genital cutting (FGC) involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. The practice has no health benefits for girls and women.



About the Activists Retreats

Since 2018, Sahiyo has hosted annual **Activists Retreats** to bring together FGC survivors and other members of the Bohra community. They're able to discuss FGC in a safe space, explore ways to collaborate with one another, and find solutions to bring about change to end this harmful practice.

Through the retreats, individuals have been able to do the following:

- Gain extensive knowledge about FGC
- Learn more about the larger anti-FGC movement to end this harmful practice
- Share personal stories about their connections to FGC
- Build community by strengthening their interpersonal relationships with others who share similar views on ending FGC

- Brainstorm ideas and collective goals on how to work individually and together to advocate against FGC
- Discuss support and self-care strategies to utilize when engaging in emotionally difficult work.

Over the years, the retreats have supported survivors and community members to feel less alone in their experiences, break the isolation around anti-FGC advocacy, and cultivate a sense of belonging while working towards social change. These retreats have also resulted in building a community-based network of activists working to end FGC. This network supports one another by discussing challenges in addressing FGC with families and/or friends and by sharing opportunities to speak against FGC.



Program Goals

“The retreat helped me to learn quite a lot about khatna, the power of storytelling, and the challenges that FGC activists face. But more importantly, the retreat helped me learn quite a bit about myself and my need to feel validated and heard.”

~ Anonymous 2021 Activists Retreat Attendee



The aim of the Activists Retreats is to bring together ‘activists’ speaking out against FGC – individuals who work either publicly or privately and anonymously to raise community awareness about the need to end this harmful practice. The program’s objectives include:

- Building a network of Bohra activists empowered to advocate for the end of FGC
- Creating a support system among Bohra activists working to empower their community to abandon FGC
- Developing a safe space for individuals to learn more about the issue of FGC
- Building individuals’ overall capacity to engage in activism, including sharing knowledge, resources, and networks
- Sustaining continued post-retreat engagement to build community support on the issue of ending FGC.

Activists Retreat History

“I think this is a fantastic platform to not only bring awareness of the FGC practice that is occurring in the Dawoodi Bohra Community, but truly a retreat that allows everyone to feel safe... I felt Sahiyo did an incredible job of creating that safe space for everyone.”

~ Anonymous 2021 Activists Retreat Attendee



The Need to Create Safe Spaces

In 2017, Sahiyo partnered with a healthcare market research company to better understand how to support individuals belonging to the Bohra community who want to speak out against FGC or “khatna” in their community. The [Activist Needs Assessment Study](#) found that many activists were concerned about social repercussions that have or could occur against themselves or their families when speaking out against FGC. Among these concerns were:

- **Religion/Community:** Although most activists are fairly open with their families and friends about their activism, they feel only moderately supported. These concerns are linked to the social characteristics of the Bohra community, which include long-standing traditions of loyalty and closeness, in which the religious community often dictates social circles, romantic partners, neighborhood housing, cemetery sites, and more. This creates a correlation between anti-FGC activism and an attack on the community and faith at large.

- **Difficult Conversations:** When activists do speak out publicly or privately, they find the conversation about FGC particularly challenging. The lack of robust, publicly available information about the practice’s prevalence in the Bohra community, as well as its physical and mental consequences on survivors’ health, often result in other Bohra members undermining the impact of FGC.
- **Islamophobia:** The challenges faced are not limited to considerations within the Bohra community. Some activists in the U.S. fear that drawing public attention to FGC in a Muslim community might exacerbate pre-existing Islamophobia, ultimately jeopardizing their community’s wellbeing.

As a result, advocates who do speak out against FGC often work in isolation from one another. The research also highlights the importance of creating support structures for activists; these support structures aid in making individuals feel more comfortable in speaking against FGC.

Hosting the Retreats

Following the release of this research, Sahiyo held its first Activists Retreat in 2018, and has subsequently held one on an annual basis. In total, Sahiyo U.S. has hosted five retreats from 2018 to 2022.

The retreats in 2018 and 2019 were held in-person in New York; while the subsequent three retreats, starting in 2020, have been conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the 2018 retreat was initially only open to those who identified as women and who were U.S. residents, the 2019 retreat was open to Canadian residents, and the subsequent virtual retreats were broadened to include individuals of any gender identity in North America and Europe.



Attendees



Eligibility

The Activists Retreat is open to individuals of any gender identity who meet the following requirements:

- ✓ Have a connection to the Bohra community, regardless of how strongly associated with the Bohra faith they are;
- ✓ Are interested in ending the practice of FGC;
- ✓ Are 18+ years of age.

For Sahiyo U.S. in-person retreats attendees were required to reside in the U.S. or Canada. For Sahiyo U.S. virtual retreats, attendees were required to be based in North America or Europe. This decision is based on the challenges with managing time zones and virtual programming with attendees from around the world.

Public vs. Private Activism



Sahiyo recognizes that activism can occur on a scale from private to public. Public activism can include acts such as speaking to the media, hosting or presenting at an event, protesting, testifying at a hearing, giving educational trainings, and participating in other advocacy activities. Those who perform private activism may participate either anonymously or not, including speaking to a family member, writing a blog, sharing their FGC story, working or volunteering to provide support in various capacities to an organization working to end FGC, etc.

Sahiyo's Activists Retreats are open to all individuals in the Bohra community who want to stop the practice of FGC, regardless of where they stand on the public vs. private activism spectrum.

All activism, including private one-on-one conversations with loved ones, can lead to creating a critical mass of voices willing to speak against FGC; this further supports Sahiyo's Theory of Change, which recognizes that by building a critical mass of voices, we will gain momentum towards abandoning FGC. Critical factors toward social change include obtaining community buy-in and creating safe spaces and mechanisms for community dialogue on FGC without fear of reprisal. When reprisals can't be avoided, built-in support systems must be established.

This means that every individual who chooses to engage in these conversations, even if they are not able to do so publicly, is helping to spark dialogue and create change.

Sahiyo India: Activists Retreats

Sahiyo India, now a separate legal entity, held its own Activists Retreats in 2018, 2019, and 2020. The 2018 and 2019 retreats were held in-person in Mumbai, India, while the 2020 retreat took place virtually.

The first retreat was held in February 2018 with 17 people in attendance, with some attendees traveling to Mumbai from various parts of India, marking one of the first gatherings of advocates across India coming together to discuss FGC.

The 2019 retreat was held in January with 15 people. The attendees ranged in age from 19 to 76 years old.

While the 2018 retreat was attended exclusively by activists from the Dawoodi Bohra sub-sect, the 2019 retreat featured greater diversity. In addition to Dawoodi Bohras, attendees included two young women from Vadodara’s Alvi Bohra community, two reformist Bohras from Udaipur, and two women from Sunni Muslim communities from the south Indian state of Kerala.

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sahiyo India held their retreat virtually and had an attendance of twenty-one women and men from across different parts of India. The attendees ranged in age from 18 to 69. The attendees included activists from the Dawoodi Bohra community, three women from FGC-practicing communities from the state of Kerala, Sahiyo India volunteers, researchers, and lawyers. The diverse attendees were able to bring fresh perspectives and new knowledge to the discussions on FGC in India and who is impacted by the harmful practice, while also highlighting the challenges of speaking out against it.

To learn more, read participant blogs:

- [Experiencing Sahiyo’s Activists Retreat in Mumbai](#)
- [My experience at Sahiyo’s first Activists Retreat in India](#)
- [The experience of hosting my very own Thaal Pe Charcha](#)





RETREAT DESIGN

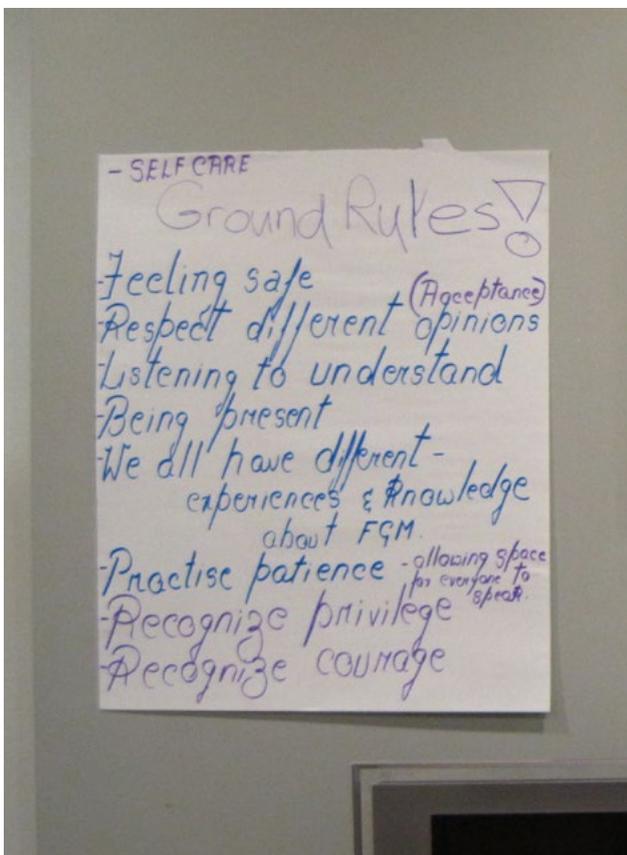
Before the Retreat

Planning the Retreats

The planning phase for Activists Retreats begins six months from the start of the retreat itself. The process involves outreach and recruitment of potential attendees, creating the retreat’s agenda, as well as coordinating facilitators and guest speakers. If the retreat is in-person, the process also includes coordinating logistics for where and when to host the retreat.

In 2018, Sahiyo’s U.S. Executive Director, Mariya Taher, and a volunteer, Alisha Bhagat, both of whom grew up in the Dawoodi Bohra community, collaborated on the content of the first Activists Retreat. In subsequent years, Sahiyo has assembled a planning committee consisting of former Sahiyo retreat attendees to ensure the agenda of the retreat meets the needs of future attendees.

Planning committee members commit five to ten hours a month to organize the retreat logistics and build the retreat agenda. The committee changes its membership each year as new retreat attendees declare interest in helping plan future retreats.



Recruitment

During recruitment, the retreats were never advertised on social media or in any public forums. Instead, Sahiyo U.S. used a snowballing method that relied on word-of-mouth to connect with potential attendees. This involved contacting past attendees via email and WhatsApp and encouraging individuals to share the application link with their trusted networks. Recruitment was conducted in this way to ensure the creation of safe spaces, recognizing there can be retaliation or backlash for those who speak publicly about FGC in the Bohra community, as often FGC is considered a required social norm.

Further, for the safety and privacy of those who speak out against FGC, the 2018 to 2022 Activists Retreats were confidential private events, meaning identifying information regarding who attends the retreats was never revealed without an attendee’s explicit permission.

Retreats Through the Years

Activists Retreat #1



Sahiyo U.S. held its [first-ever U.S.-based Activists Retreat](#) from January 19-21, 2018 in Brooklyn, New York. The retreat brought together 11 attendees, including two Bohra facilitators, to discuss activism around FGC and other issues pertaining to the Dawoodi Bohra community.

The 2018 agenda focused on the following topics:

- **Why Community-Led and Survivor-Led Movements are Important:** This session highlighted the importance of community and survivor-led FGC movements. Survivors shared their personal stories and had follow-up discussions.

- **Effective Communication and Challenges in the Community:** This session focused on the problems that activists and survivors face within their communities; the discussions explored religious, cultural, and/or patriarchal challenges.
- **Creating a Critical Mass of Voices - How to Support Activists and Community Members:** In this session, attendees discussed research findings from external organizations and opened the discussion to FGC as a global issue.
- **Action Planning:** In this session, Sahiyo U.S. worked with attendees to plan a set of personal goals as well as group goals for the coming year related to advocacy to end FGC.



Creating Tools

Sahiyo U.S. created tools and resources that attendees were introduced to at the retreat, which they could utilize for their own learnings and advocacy work. These tools were developed from feedback received from activists who attended past retreats. Resources that have been created over the years include:

- A toolkit on understanding Bohra dynamics that influence FGC
- A toolkit on how activists can overcome challenges in advocacy work
- A guide on how to have effective conversations on FGC
- [A guide on social media and digital advocacy education](#)
- An interactive timeline of the Bohra movement to end FGC



During the Retreat

Every retreat consisted of workshops, information sessions, reflection periods, group discussions, and networking opportunities. Depending on the theme or topic, guest speakers were invited to attend and share their knowledge with retreat attendees. Past guest speakers have included authors, human rights lawyers, and therapists to lead sessions; giving attendees a diverse range of perspectives on the topic. Throughout the retreat, attendees have the opportunity to further their activism by building community connections with fellow attendees. Additionally, attendees were provided opportunities for self-reflection through journaling exercises and one-on-one conversations with other attendees.

On the last day of the retreat, attendees created individualized and group goals through an action planning session, enabling them to determine how they

wanted to engage in ending FGC in recognition of their strengths and comfort levels in engaging in private vs. public activism. Examples goals have included: starting a Discord group to further build community with advocates and creating a blog series about sexual health (Sahiyo's [Dear Maasi](#) blog column). Group goals have included starting a program to encourage male allyship in the work to end FGM/C (now [Sahiyo's Bhaiyo program](#)).

Each retreat, whether in-person or virtual, follows the same structure:

- **Day 1 - Focus on community building and getting to know fellow retreat attendees**
- **Day 2 - Dive into conversations around FGC, activism, and self-care**
- **Day 3 - Design action plans to achieve personal and group goals related to FGC activism**

Activists Retreat #2



Sahiyo U.S. hosted its [second Activists Retreat](#) from March 29-31, 2019 in Brooklyn, New York. This retreat supported 21 attendees and was also open to attendees from Canada.

The 2019 agenda focused on the following topics:

- **Why Community-Led and Survivor-Led Movements are Important:** This session highlighted the importance of community and survivor-led FGC movements. Survivors shared their personal stories and had follow-up discussions.
- **Purity Culture Talk:** This session focused on social stigmas involving purity culture and its connections to cleanliness, morality, and religion. During this event, author Linda Kay Klein spoke about her book, "Pure." Growing up in the Midwest, Linda was immersed in the white evangelical Christian purity culture where any expression of a girl's sexuality could reflect the corruption of her character. She discussed the mind and body shaming that can occur within a religious movement, and showed how purity culture is not tied to a single religion or culture but has tentacles in many patriarchal societies.
- **Other Social Norms and Dynamics Connected to FGC:** This session involved discussions on social norms and dynamics in the Dawoodi Bohra community that are connected to FGC. For example, the connection to *iddatt*, the practice of a woman going into seclusion for a period of time after her husband dies.⁴
- **Federal Law Enforcement Efforts to Prevent and End FGC:** This session highlighted how law has impacted FGC in the U.S., including discussions around the U.S. court cases involving the Dawoodi Bohra community. This session was led by federal law enforcement agents.
- **Tips for Social Media Advocacy on FGC:** This session highlighted ways in which awareness can be raised about FGC on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter.
- **Systems Change Mapping:** This workshop focused on exploring the individual, multi-layered identities within the Dawoodi Bohra community to better help attendees understand their own strengths and challenges when it comes to working to end FGC.
- **Action Planning:** During this session, attendees planned a set of personal goals as well as group goals for the coming year related to advocacy on ending FGC.

⁴In Islam, iddah or iddat is the period a woman must observe after the death of her husband or after a divorce, during which she may not marry another man. One of its main purposes is to remove any doubt as to the paternity of a child born after the divorce or death of the prior husband.

Activists Retreat #3

In April 2020, Sahiyo U.S. hosted its third Activists Retreat with 15 activists. Due to the unique circumstance of the COVID-19 pandemic, this retreat was adapted as a series of webinar meetings over three shorter days.

The 2020 agenda focused on the following topics:

- **Why Community-Led and Survivor-Led Movements are Important:** This session highlighted the importance of community and survivor-led FGC movements. Survivors shared their personal stories and had follow-up discussions.
- **Mental Health and FGC:** This session explored the mental health impacts of FGC and steps survivors can take to enhance their mental health.
- **Mock Conversations:** This session explored how to have difficult conversations about FGC with friends and family via role-playing and provided those attending with additional resources to help to carry out conversations on FGC with family, friends, and community members, particularly in situations where the other party might be for the continuation of FGC.
- **Action Planning:** During this session, attendees planned a set of personal goals as well as group goals for the coming year related to advocacy on ending FGC.

Activists Retreat #4

In April 2021, Sahiyo U.S. hosted its [fourth Activists Retreat](#) virtually. In total, 15 activists attended this online retreat. They were joined by multiple guest speakers, including Sameera Qureshi and Shelby Quast.

The 2021 agenda focused on the following topics:

- **Why Community-Led and Survivor-Led Movements are Important:** This session highlighted the importance of community and survivor-led FGC movements. Survivors shared their personal stories and had follow-up discussions.
- **Mock Conversations:** This session explored conversations via role-playing and provided those attending with additional resources to help with carrying out those conversations.
- **Sexuality, Trauma, and Healing with Sameera Qureshi:** During this session, attendees specifically explored FGC and how myths about female sexuality are pervasive, especially as it relates to sexual pleasure and the clitoris. Sameera Qureshi, an expert on issues of sexual health, Islam and sexuality, mental health, healthy relationships, and Islamic psychology, led the session.
- **The Legal History of FGM/C in the United States:** During this session, attendees had the opportunity to hear from lawyer Shelby Quast about the history of federal and state legislation on FGM/C in the U.S., as well as the various court cases on FGC occurring around the world connected to the Bohra community.
- **Action Planning:** During this session, attendees planned a set of personal goals as well as group goals for the coming year related to advocacy on ending FGC.

Activists Retreat #5



In June 2022, Sahiyo U.S. held its [fifth Activists Retreat](#), which gathered 13 attendees. The virtual aspect of this retreat allowed for a global gathering, as attendees joined from the U.S., Canada, and countries throughout Europe. Guest speakers included Amy Hill from StoryCenter and psychotherapist and author Farzana Doctor.

The 2022 agenda focused on the following topics:

- **Why Community-Led and Survivor-Led Movements are Important:**
This session highlighted the importance of community and survivor-led FGC movements. Survivors shared their personal stories and had follow-up discussions.
- **The Bohra Movement to End FGC:**
This session provided an overview of the Bohra movement to end FGC over the years and highlighted the importance of survivors and community members taking the lead in ending FGC.
- **Self-Care for FGC Activists:**
During this workshop, guest speaker Farzana Doctor discussed psychological frameworks to better understand what happens in the mind and body when activists feel “burnout,” and how to prevent it.
- **Community Identity Mapping:**
This interactive activity used reflective prompts to help explore the individual, unique, and multi-layered identities within the Bohra community.
- **Storytelling Workshop:**
This session, led by Amy Hill from StoryCenter, explored conversations around FGC via storytelling and provided attendees with additional resources to help in sharing their stories.
- **Action Planning:**
During this session, attendees planned a set of personal goals as well as group goals for the coming year related to advocacy on ending FGC.



After the Retreat

Staying Engaged

Following the retreat, Sahiyo U.S. supports attendees in several ways, so they can stay connected, maintain community, and achieve their set goals.

Reflection

Attendees reflect on their experience and write a short article to be shared on Sahiyo’s highly read blog,⁵ either with their full name or anonymously, depending on their comfort and preference.

[See Appendix](#)

Connection

Sahiyo U.S. hosts four check-in meetings throughout the year so retreat attendees are able to connect and share both challenges and successes in their activism to end FGC since the retreat.

Sahiyo U.S. has also established communication platforms to bring together attendees from all years of Activists Retreats, including a Google Groups List-serve, a private Facebook Group, and a WhatsApp group.

⁵ Sahiyo’s blog has increased in viewership each year since its founding in 2015, averaging annually around 100,000 views.



Attendees

Overall

To date, the Sahiyo U.S. Activists Retreat program has trained 77 individuals who represent a variety of demographics, including age, educational background, socioeconomic status, and location. Though some specific demographic information was not collected at the program's launch in 2018, the following information is known of the attendees:



Ethnicity:

99% identified as South Asian

1% identified as East Asian

Geographic Location:

93% reside in the U.S.

4% reside in the United Kingdom

2% reside in Canada

Individual Retreats

Attendees Age	2018(n=11)	2019 (n=21)	2020 (n=15)*	2021 (n=15)	2022 (n=13)
18 to 25 years old	N/A	See table below	N/A	25%	0%
26 to 35 years old	N/A	See table below	N/A	12.5%	44.4%
36 to 45 years old	N/A	See table below	N/A	12.5%	22.2%
46 to 55 years old	N/A	See table below	N/A	50%	33.3%
51 to 60 years old	N/A	See table below	N/A	N/A	N/A

This question was not asked to participants for the 2020 retreat
 *** N/A- Date not available

Attendees Age	2019 (n=21)
18 to 30 years old	38.9%
31 to 40 years old	27.8%
41 to 50 years old	22.2%
51 to 60 years old	11.1%

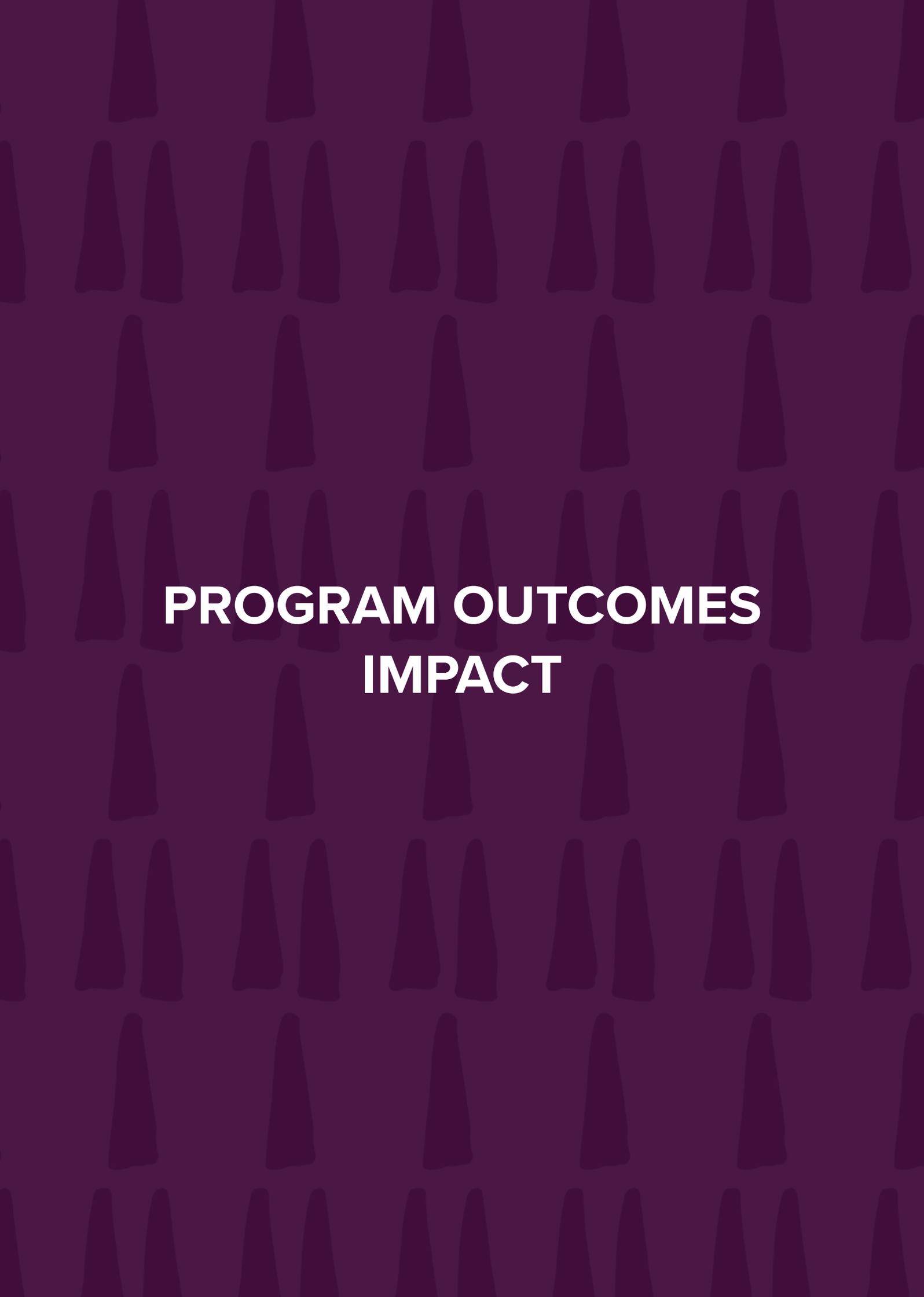
*** Note 2019 age demographic question were broken out differently

Geography Where Attendee Resides	2018(n=11)	2019 (n=21)	2020 (n=15)	2021 (n=15)	2022 (n=13)
United States	100%	95.3%	93.33%	88.2%	78%
Canada	0%	4.7%	6.67%	11.8%	0%
United Kingdom	0%	0%	0%	0%	22%

Gender Identity of Attendees	2022 (n=13)
Women	78%
Men	11%
Gender Queer/ Non-binary	11%

*** Note that data on gender identity was not collected before 2022

All demographic information from 2018 to 2022 was collected from participants who completed the post-event evaluation. Some attendees chose not to provide that information and we respected their wishes. The 'n' indicates the total number of attendees who took part in the retreat each year, not necessarily all who filled out the post-event evaluation



**PROGRAM OUTCOMES
IMPACT**

Evaluation

A post-retreat survey is distributed to all attendees as an opportunity to reflect on their retreat experiences and inform us on improvements needed to strengthen the retreats moving forward. However, as a growing program, there was not a standardized set of evaluative criteria at the establishment of the program in 2018, and as a result different evaluation questions were asked each year. In 2022, Sahiyo U.S. standardized evaluation questions.



The following table summarizes results from each individual Activists Retreat from 2018 to 2022.

	2018 (n=9)	2019 (n=18)	2020 (n=16)	2021 (n=8)	2022 (n=9)
Content was informative and useful or considered satisfactory.	87.5%	80%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Retreat provided new materials and resources for advocacy	N/A	94.1%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Retreat achieved its goals and mission	N/A	83.3%	100%	100%	88.9%
Retreat was clear about goals & mission	N/A	N/A	100%	100%	100%
Fulfilled personal advocacy goals	N/A	N/A	100%	100%	77.8%
Will attend future retreats	N/A	N/A	100%	100%	89%

Overall Outcomes & Impact

5 retreats hosted

77 attendees total

67% of alumni stayed engaged in anti-FGC advocacy

33 alumni blogs posted to Sahiyo's platforms

13 alumni participated in Sahiyo's [Voices to End FGM/C](#) project

4 alumni helped to launch the Bhaiyo Program

Since the launch of the Activists Retreat program, **Sahiyo U.S. has hosted 5 retreats, one per year, with a total of 77 attendees.** Over the past five years, the program has tracked impact in the following ways:

Attendees have strengthened their relationships with other Bohra members in the anti-FGC movement and built a sense of community.



The Activists Retreat allows attendees to meet and network with one another. As activists often work in isolation, the retreat acts as a gathering



space for people who would otherwise be working independently. Connection between attendees is also supported by communication networks facilitated by Sahiyo U.S. that include WhatsApp group chats and other methods of staying connected and informed. Upon reflecting on these events, many retreat attendees report feeling a greater sense of connection and community.



Attendees have learned new skills for long-term activism, including advocacy, leadership, legal knowledge, and how to engage in conversations on FGC.

By inviting guest speakers from a variety of backgrounds and developing toolkits, Sahiyo provides activists with tools and skills to assist them in their personal lives and in their activism journey.

These skills help to ensure they are able to safely engage in activism and take care of their own health and safety throughout that process.

Attendees have increased their well-being, mental health, and ability to support themselves in their advocacy.

Through the community building, support resources, and the long-term engagement Sahiyo’s Activists Retreats offer, many attendees report feeling a greater sense of self-efficacy and ability to engage in activism while avoiding burnout.

Attendees have remained engaged in activism to end FGC post-retreat.

On the whole, attendees leave Activists Retreats feeling more empowered to address the issue of FGC within their families and communities. Specifically, **67% of participants stayed engaged in anti-FGC advocacy.** Many go on to organize and host workshops to raise awareness on FGC, participate in outreach campaigns within communities affected by FGC, and give testimony at policy briefings in various states and/or regions.

Attendees have also gone on to join Sahiyo’s Voices to End FGM/C program, share their stories via [Sahiyo’s blog](#), help lead Sahiyo’s male allyship program, Bhaiyo, and speak with media platforms and/or acted as research consultants on FGC to increase public awareness of the issue.

Post-Retreat Advocacy Examples



33 blogs posted to Sahiyo's platforms

Following the retreat, activists are invited to write a blog (with the option to remain anonymous) reflecting on their experiences at the retreat. This allows them to share their story and journey to activism, as well as to encourage others to join future retreats.

An Activist's Story: What Community Means to Me

Following her fifth retreat, long-time retreat attendee and member of the planning committee Zehra Patwa wrote a blog about how the Sahiyo Activists Retreat has helped her develop a sense of community. During the retreat, she reflects on how amazing it is to be connected to members of the Bohra community from across the U.S. and the world on this issue. In her own words, "community is what we make of it and the anti-FGC Bohra Activists Retreat is, to me, an incredibly warm, supportive, and fascinating community that I hope to be part of for a very long time."

You can read more about Zehra's experience and reflection on [Sahiyo's Blog](#) and watch her video here:

13 alumni participated in the [Voices to End FGM/C](#) digital storytelling project

Attendees have gone on to join Sahiyo's Voices to End FGM/C digital storytelling program. Voices to End FGM/C mobilizes a critical mass of storytellers and activists from across the globe by bringing them together to share and heal from FGC, connect and grow as leaders, and create short videos calling for an end to this harmful practice.



Umme's Journey to the Voices Workshop

"When I was first invited to join Sahiyo's 2022 Activists Retreat, I was... terrified. I almost didn't sign up. I wanted to be an activist and I wanted to do more with Sahiyo, but I was scared of both..."

Despite their initial hesitation, long-time Sahiyo volunteer, Umme Kulsoom Arif, went on to say of their experience: "what the Retreat offered me was a confirmation that I was not alone or an aberration, and that I was enough simply for wanting to speak up and speak about my story. I made friends. I was invited to speak about my identity as a non-binary survivor – which in itself was terrifying, but I did it and found myself feeling even more validated through that experience."

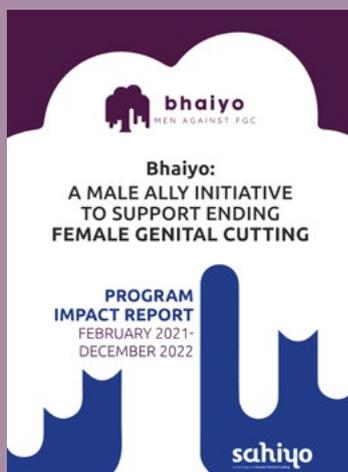
Inspired by the Activists Retreat, they took the brave step to participate in the Sahiyo Voices to End FGM/C project. Their video, titled 'Writers Blood,' was released in 2023; you can watch it here.



4 alumni helped to launch the Bhaiyo program

Bhaiyo Program: Engaging Male Allies

Launched on International Day for Zero Tolerance to FGC in February 2021, Bhaiyo is Sahiyo's male allyship program. Meaning 'male friends' or 'brothers' in Bohra Gujarati, Bhaiyo is both a resource and an avenue for men to become involved in raising awareness of FGC. The Bhaiyo program grew out of Sahiyo U.S.'s 2020 Activists Retreat, which for the first time included male-identifying activists. During this retreat, the attendees voiced an interest in creating a program or support system for male allies who wanted to work on ending FGC; from that interest, Bhaiyo was created. In this way, Bhaiyo grew organically from a community recognition that fostering male engagement in FGC prevention required unique and gender-responsive programming in order to address the educational and activism needs of men.



Read more in the [Bhaiyo Impact Report](#).



LESSONS LEARNED

LESSONS LEARNED

The Activists Retreat program, though successful, has endured growing pains and faced challenges during its implementation. These 'lessons learned' offer insights into what works well and what can be strengthened for this community-based program.

Virtual vs. In-Person Retreats

Challenge

Over the years, the Activists Retreat have been held in-person as well as virtually. There are distinct advantages and disadvantages with both. In-person retreats allow for greater connection between activists, but they are more expensive and more challenging to coordinate. Virtual retreats are cost effective and allow people around the world to participate. However, attendees in virtual retreats miss the in-person connections and often struggle with burnout or 'Zoom Fatigue'.

Takeaway

Fundamentally, programming needs to be flexible and balance the tension between personal and/or global events that may limit attendees' ability to attend with the value that in-person interaction holds.

Attendance

Challenge

Since its launch in 2018, the Activists Retreat has maintained a steady attendance. However, due to the social stigma surrounding speaking out against FGC and attendee capacity, recruiting participants has its challenges. In conversations with retreat attendees around engagement challenges, attendees have noted fears related to community backlash, capacity to attend, and fears of not being 'Bohra' or religious enough to participate. Many also feel they are not versed enough in anti-FGC activism to attend the retreats and fully participate.

Takeaway

Conducting attendee recruitment means allowing for all levels of activism and welcoming people in varying places along their learning journey. The Activists Retreat has taught us that activism to end FGC is a path of learning, understanding, and acting. Programming that recognizes this learning journey and meets the potential of all retreat attendees "where they are at," whether it is learning more about FGC through educational events, participating (anonymously or not) in anti-FGC prevention programs, and leading anti-FGC campaigns, is critical in ensuring future generations don't undergo this harm.

Involving Men

Challenge

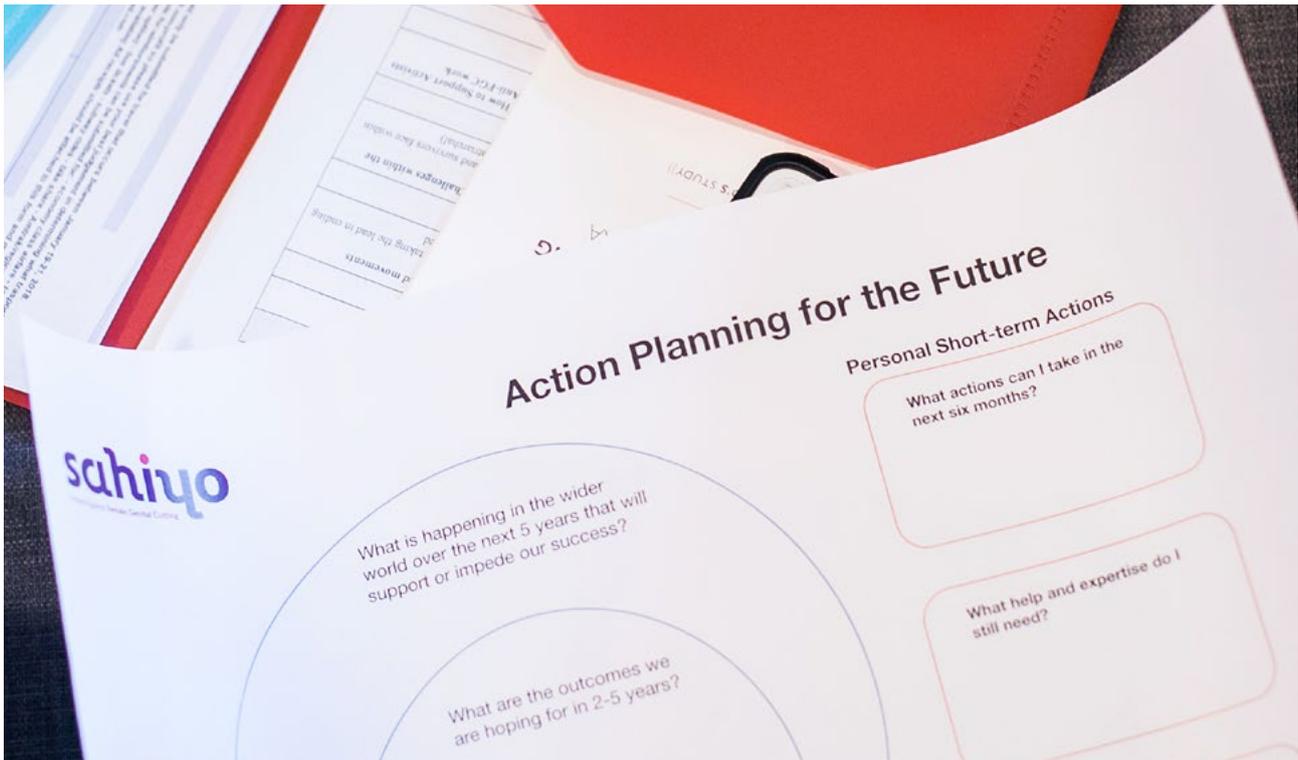
Sahiyo recognizes that many FGC-practicing communities also reaffirm patriarchal structures wherein women are subjected to a lesser role in society and lack the authority and decision-making abilities. As a result, engaging men on the issue of FGC is crucial to ending this practice. In 2020, we opened the retreat up to male identifying attendees for the first time. While a few male allies have joined the cause, there is still much work to be done to engage men on anti-FGC activism. Many men have expressed that their voices can't be impactful in encouraging their communities to end FGC and also struggle to find a space from which to advocate on FGC when it is relegated as a "woman's issue."

Takeaway

Allying with men working to end FGC is crucial in the work to end FGC given the patriarchal structure of many FGC impacted communities. Conducting male engagement work means allowing for all levels of activism and welcoming people in varying places along their learning journey. Programming needs to recognize this learning journey and create space for male allies to show up wherever they are in their journey.



FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS



Program Expansion

As Sahiyo U.S. increases organizational capacity, the Activists Retreats will seek to expand in the following ways:

- **Provide long-term support to Activists Retreat attendees throughout the year, by hosting recurring meetings, skill-building opportunities, action planning, and more, during and after each retreat;**
- **Expand the program to include Asian Pacific Islander (API) and South West Asian and North African (SWANA) FGC-practicing populations outside the Bohra community;**
- **Host both virtual and hybrid formats of the Activists Retreat to reach more individuals impacted by FGC, and provide higher quality of support and relationship building.**

Overall, program expansion will further strengthening of relationships and network building among survivors and impacted community members who need a supportive structure, but who are often geographically distant from one another. Program expansion will also allow for best practices and tools to be shared not only during the workshop, but throughout the year. As a result, FGC survivors and impacted community members will be able to enhance their own well-being and skills to more effectively raise awareness in their respective communities about the need to end this harmful practice. Program expansion will help build the critical mass of culturally-based community voices against FGC, shift social norms, and prevent the continuation of FGC amongst future generations.

APPENDIX

Sahiyo U.S. Retreat Reports

[Sahiyo U.S. 2022 Activists Retreat \(Virtual\)](#)

[Sahiyo U.S. 2021 Activists Retreat \(Virtual\)](#)

[Sahiyo U.S. 2019 Activists Retreat \(Brooklyn, NY\)](#)

[Sahiyo U.S. 2018 Activists Retreat \(Brooklyn, NY\)](#)

Youtube Videos

[Sahiyo U.S. Activist Retreat 2019 Playlist](#)

[Mariya](#)

[Zehra](#)

[Sakina](#)

[Maryum](#)

[Salma](#)

[Aiman](#)

[Maryah](#)

[Rashida](#)

U.S. Bohra Activists Retreat 2018 Playlist

[A Reflection from Zehra Patwa](#)

[Lessons learnt from the first U.S. Activists Retreat for Bohras against FGC by Mariya Taher](#)

[My Reflections on Sahiyo's Activist Retreat and my advocacy on ending FGM/C in the U.S.](#)

[My Empowerment at the Sahiyo U.S. Activist Retreat: Maria Akhter](#)

[I attended the U.S. Bohra Activist Retreat because I hope to see an end to FGM/C in my lifetime](#)

[Alisha's Experience at the U.S. Activist Retreat in Jan 2018](#)

[How Dawoodi Bohra activists in the U.S. are working to end female genital cutting](#)

[My Sahiyo U.S. Activists Retreat Reflection](#)

[How Dawoodi Bohra Activist are working to end female genital cutting in the United States](#)

2018 Sahiyo India Activists Retreat

[Three Generations Speak Against FGC](#)

[How We Can Work Together to End FGC](#)

[Dr. Sheroo Zamindar](#)

[Arefa](#)

[Saleha pt 1](#)

[Saleha pt 2](#)

[Three Generations of Women](#)

[Shabana](#)

Published Blogs

2018

- [I attended the U.S. Bohra Activist Retreat because I hope to see an end to FGM/C in my lifetime](#)
- [Shifting terrains: Lessons learnt from the first U.S. Activists Retreat for Bohras against Female Genital Cutting](#)
- [My Reflections on Sahiyo's Activist Retreat and my advocacy on ending FGM/C in the U.S.](#)
- [Sahiyo U.S. Activists Retreat: A reflection](#)
- [My experience at Sahiyo's first Activists Retreat in India](#)
- [My Sahiyo U.S. Activists Retreat Reflection](#)
- [The U.S. Sahiyo retreat taught me there are different ways of being Bohri in America, and we can all end FGC](#)

2019

- [My experience at the Sahiyo U.S. Activist Retreat made me reflect on my khatna](#)
- [Experiencing Sahiyo's Activist Retreat in Mumbai](#)
- [My experience of healing by attending the 2019 Sahiyo Activist Retreat in the U.S.](#)
- [I have a story to tell - I was NOT cut: Reflecting after the Sahiyo U.S. Activist Retreat](#)
- [Sahiyo USA's Second Annual Activist Retreat: A recap](#)

2021

- [A reflection on Sahiyo's Activists Retreat: Creating an impact to end female genital cutting](#)
- [A reflection on Sahiyo's Activists Retreat: A sense of belonging](#)

2022

- [Reflecting on the 5th Annual Activist Retreat for members of the Bohra Community](#)
- [Activists Retreat Reflection: A shift that was needed](#)
- [Activists Retreat Reflection: Umme's experience](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND REPORT DESIGN CREDIT

Thanks to all those who have supported the Activists Retreat program over the years.

Our Funders:

Ben & Jerry's Foundation
Peace Development Fund
Resist
The Miami Foundation - Secular Humanist Fund
Wallace Global Fund

Sahiyo Staff:

Aries Nuno
Catherine Cox
Mariya Taher
Meg Sinnott
Michelle Taylor
Rachel Wine
Urvashi Sharma
Samman Masud

Sahiyo Interns & Volunteers:

Hannah Valentine
Trisha Kini

Report Designers:

Finally, thanks to Shabana Feroze and her team at [The Silver Kick Company](#) for offering their graphic design and editing skills to the completion of this report.



@SahiyoVoices

CONTACT US

Email: info@sahiyo.org

U.S. Phone # +1-508-263-0112

Mailing address:

45 Prospect street, Cambridge, MA, 02139

sahiyo.org