

VOICES TO END FGM/C PROGRAM OVERVIEW 2018 - 2023

Needs Statement

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of many communities, and openly questioning or opposing it can lead to ostracism and isolation. People from practicing communities have feared being marginalized by their own communities, thus perpetuating a culture of acceptance and silence surrounding FGM/C. Additionally, the fear of straining relationships with loved ones involved in the practice has been a powerful deterrent. FGM/C often spans generations within families, creating a painful dilemma for those torn between ending a harmful tradition and preserving their connections with their family members. Consequently, when survivors of FGM/C do decide to openly share their experiences, they often encounter stigma or well-intentioned but unwanted pity. This victim labeling can inadvertently undermine the sense of agency and resilience they have developed in overcoming adversity.

Breaking this silence and fostering open discussions about FGM/C is imperative to challenge and shift these deeply ingrained social norms, particularly given the covert nature of the practice. Furthermore, it is crucial to address the issue of agency when survivors are asked to share their stories publicly. Many survivors lack control over how their narratives are portrayed, leading to potential retraumatization and the spread of misinformation or misrepresentation.

Real people's stories can have greater reach and impact when they are shared widely, both in local community settings and through social media. Studies in [communications research](#) underscore the transformative power of convening small groups, where individuals come together to share and bear witness to each other's stories. This collaborative process not only elevates individual well-being but also fosters crucial support networks and forges stronger relationships. Most notably, it serves as a catalyst for increased engagement in the realm of social justice advocacy. Therefore, creating safe and secure opportunities for survivors to raise awareness of the topic by sharing their stories has the potential to contribute to the prevention of FGM/C.

Program Goals

[Voices to End FGM/C](#) is a dynamic collaboration between Sahiyo and [Silence Speaks](#). Silence Speaks uses trauma-informed digital storytelling methods to address gender-based violence and other human rights concerns. The primary goal of the Voices program is to mobilize a critical mass of storytellers and advocates from across the globe by bringing them together to share and heal from FGM/C, connect and grow as leaders, and create short videos calling for an end to this harmful practice.

The goals of Voices to End FGM/C are as follows:

- Create 2-3 minute videos of personal narratives related to FGM/C.
- Develop skills in personal storytelling, photography, video editing, and advocacy.
- Establish a meaningful and lasting peer support network.

Program Impact

An [evaluation](#) conducted in 2020, involving 15 participants from past Voices to End FGM/C workshops, revealed several long-term benefits:

- Voices stories as powerful counter-narratives: The authenticity and candor with which participants share their stories, employing their own words, visuals, and video footage effectively challenged the prevailing silence and hesitancy in speaking out against FGM/C. These digital stories have emerged as courageous counter-narratives against the dominant discourse that supports the practice within their respective communities. Additionally, they served as a powerful contrast to the sensationalist media, which often dilutes the intention of survivors who choose to speak out.
- Solidarity through storytelling: The digital storytelling workshop space not only empowered storytellers but also fostered deep connections among participants. This sense of community, built through the process of crafting their stories and sustained by subsequent follow-up activities, has emerged as a remedy to the oppressive silence that often surrounds FGM/C.
- The courage to become an advocate: Survivors willing to break the silence must navigate complex conflicts within both their families and communities. Collectively, their narratives offer a multifaceted and nuanced perspective on FGM/C, igniting a rich dialogue between individuals and communities. As storytellers, they continue to influence and encourage each other in their advocacy efforts, demonstrating immense courage and resilience.

Program Activities

Workshop Program Activities

All Voices to End FGM/C digital storytelling workshops, whether online, in-person, or a combination of the two, include the following elements:

- Introduction to Personal Storytelling Techniques
- Story Circle
- Scriptwriting and Recording
- Photography and Videography 101
- Learning and Practice in Digital Video Editing
- Internal Screening of the Produced Videos

Following each workshop, the Sahiyo team works to create a distribution strategy for the videos, crafted in the form of a social media toolkit. This toolkit serves as a structured guide, outlining a schedule for releasing the stories and hosting story screenings. Additionally, the storytellers are encouraged to delve into their storytelling journeys by writing reflection blogs, a key element of the toolkit.

Alumni Program Activities

To facilitate further connection amongst Voices Alumni, all participants are part of a Voices Alumni email Listserv. This platform ensures they remain up-to-date on potential opportunities to participate in events related to their digital stories, as well as facilitate regular communication to foster a sense of continuous connection and support within the Voices Community. Alumni members are also encouraged to make this platform a space to connect, learn, and grow together, and can include participant-led initiatives and activities (i.e., storytelling game nights).

Additionally, recognizing the profound sensitivity and vulnerability inherent in sharing personal stories, AWS, a San Francisco-based domestic violence organization deeply committed to ensuring every individual's right to live in a violence-free home, joined hands with Sahiyo to establish the Voices Healing Circle. This initiative is designed to serve as an alumni support network encompassing all participants who have engaged in the Voices workshops over the years. Through virtual gatherings, this safe and supportive space has been created for participants to share their experiences, foster a sense of camaraderie, and engage in open discussion of any challenges they may have encountered since their involvement with the workshops.

Program Impact by the Numbers

2017-2023

8

workshops hosted

73

participants

75

Voices videos

19+

**countries represented
by participants**

99,000+

**views of videos across
multiple social media
platforms**

13+

**public online and in-
person Voices video
screenings**

2

**Alumni events
and activités**

1

Alumni Listserv

Looking Forward

Sahiyo U.S. and SilenceSpeaks are looking to expand the scope of the Voices program in the following ways:

- Host additional workshops in the U.S. and globally
- Support survivors before, during, and after the story creation process and their continued growth as leaders and advocates
- Consider how to encourage more participation from men and boys in the Voices program.
- Build out the Voices Alumni Network, to host reunions, alumni activities and other support groups as needed
- Provide additional resources to storytellers on addressing backlash after sharing a story, hosting story screenings, and more
- Expand mediums used for voices workshops, including the creation of podcasts to reach varying audiences and produce content on different platforms
- Collaborate with media outlets to feature Voices stories and raise awareness about FGM/C (i.e., podcasts, newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.)