



ACTIVISTS RETREAT PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS IMPACTED BY FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

April 2023 to June 2025

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DISCLAIMER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report highlights the achievements and insights of Sahiyo's American Rescue Plan (ARP) Activists Retreat Program from April 2023 to June 2025. Funded by the ARP Support for Survivors Grant Program through the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, this program uniquely recognized female genital cutting (FGC) as a form of sexual assault. This landmark funding allowed Sahiyo to provide culturally responsive services to the South Asian Dawoodi Bohra community and other Asian and Pacific Islander (API) and

Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities in the United States.

The program's retreats offered FGC survivors and community members safe spaces to address isolation, build connections, and cultivate a sense of belonging while driving social change. Participants enhanced their well-being, developed critical skills, and strengthened their capacity to raise awareness about ending FGC in their communities.



Key Achievements

With the support of ARP funding, Sahiyo launched four additional retreats between April 2023 and June 2025, engaging a total of 33 participants across these retreats, with many individuals participating in multiple retreats. Notably, prior to 2023, retreats were held exclusively for the Dawoodi Bohra community. However, with ARP funding, this program was expanded to be inclusive of additional API and MENA communities starting in 2024, featuring a virtual retreat that fostered inclusivity and accessibility. These retreats provided transformative platforms where survivors and community advocates could connect, share strategies, and partner on various initiatives to address FGC. Additionally, Sahiyo established a dynamic alumni network, offering sustained opportunities for community connection, resource sharing, and continuous engagement among program participants.



Impact Highlights (2023–2025)

- **Expansion of the Anti-FGC Activist Network:** The program connected isolated survivors and advocates with one another, enabling them to strategize collectively to address FGC.
- **Enhanced Mental Health and Well-being:** Participants reported a reduced sense of isolation, feeling increased support, and access to mental health resources, with 87% of program participants affirming they felt more empowered to act.
- **Growing Advocacy Initiatives:** Retreat discussions inspired participants to launch new survivor-led projects and culturally specific tools to address FGC.
- **Expanding Program to New Communities:** Inclusion of API and MENA communities facilitated knowledge exchange and strengthened cross-community efforts.

Sahiyo continued and expanded alumni engagement through supporting participants to write reflection blogs on their experiences, to attend quarterly meetings to build community, and to reach out to Sahiyo for individualized support post-retreat. Additionally, a new alumni wellness program launched in 2025 has been addressing personal and vicarious trauma with activities such as art therapy, yoga, and book clubs.

Future opportunities will offer both in-person and virtual gatherings for broader accessibility, expanding the program to engage international participants, and securing sustainable funding to enhance outreach and offer additional community-engagement workshops. Through these efforts, Sahiyo continues to empower survivors, support advocates and activists, and foster long-lasting and meaningful change to address and prevent FGC.

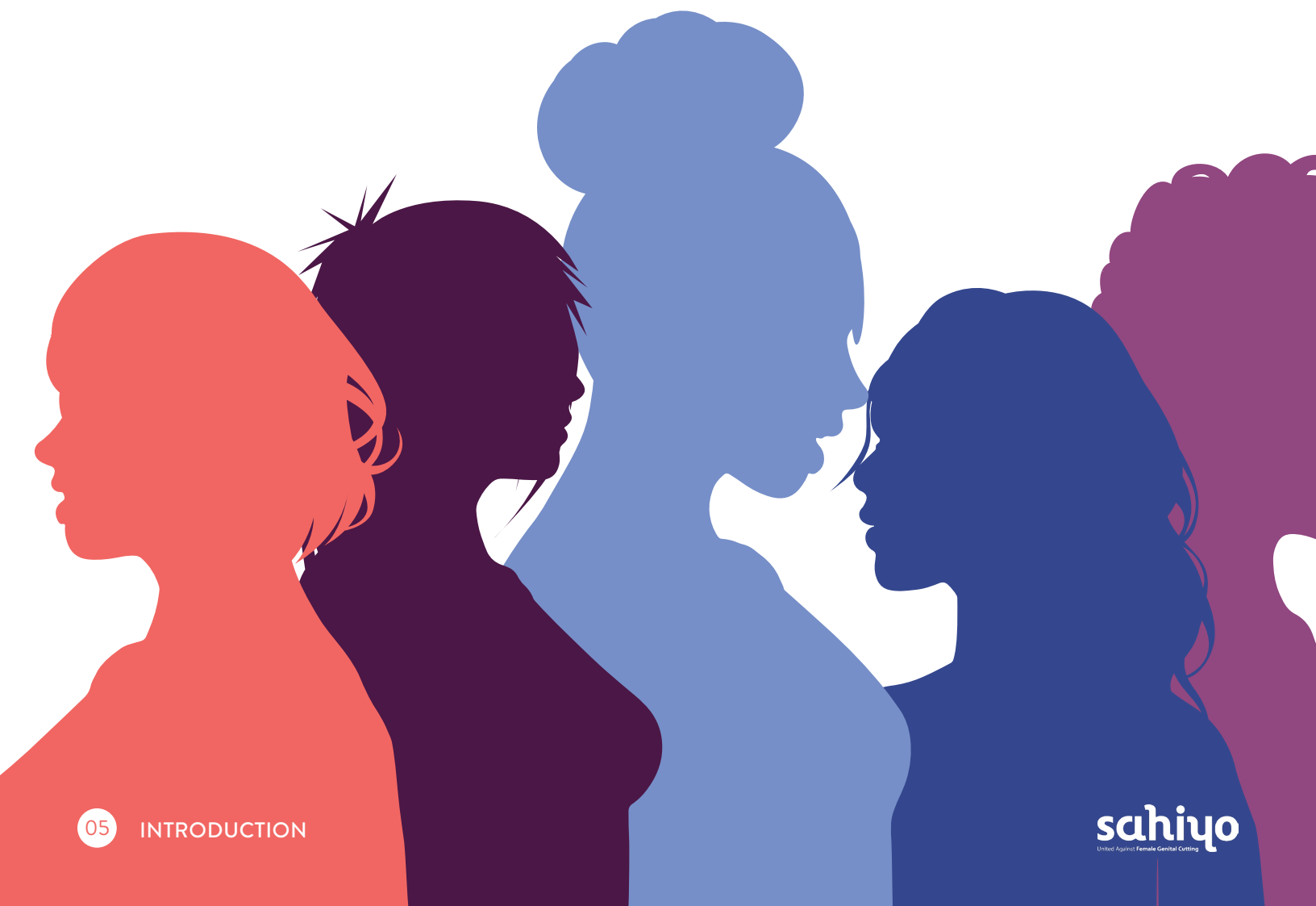
INTRODUCTION

In March 2023, Sahiyo was honored as a subaward recipient under the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act through the 2021 American Rescue Plan (ARP) cooperative agreement. This funding, awarded through the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Capacity Building Fund, marked a significant milestone by recognizing female genital cutting (FGC) as a form of sexual assault. It enabled Sahiyo to enhance and expand its Activists Retreat Program, providing culturally responsive services to South Asian communities in the United States.

With this support, Sahiyo enhanced and expanded its Activists Retreat program to serve South Asian Dawoodi Bohra communities and other Asian and Pacific Islander (API) and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities impacted by FGC. The expanded program focused on building community and fostering support networks to address the unique challenges these various communities faced.

This report details key insights and findings from Sahiyo’s Activists Retreat program during the funding period of April 1, 2023, to June 30, 2025, referred to herein as the “ARP Activists Retreat Program.”

Survivors and community members impacted by FGC often experience isolation in their efforts to raise awareness and advocate for change. Sahiyo’s Activists Retreats create safe, supportive spaces—both virtual and in-person—where survivor-advocates can connect, collaborate, and share resources. These transformative gatherings strengthen relationships among geographically dispersed advocates, promote collaboration, and facilitate the exchange of effective strategies and tools. Participants leave the retreats feeling empowered with practical insights, sparking partnerships, and amplifying survivor-led initiatives to prevent FGC and support those impacted by it.



BACKGROUND

ACTIVIST NEEDS ASSESSMENT STUDY: FINDINGS & GAPS

In 2017, Sahiyo partnered with a healthcare market research company to better understand how to support individuals connected to the Bohra community who wanted to speak out against FGC or “khatna” as it is known within their community. Sahiyo initially focused on the South Asian Dawoodi Bohra community due to its members’ significant yet underrecognized experiences with FGC and the deeply rooted cultural and religious dynamics that sustain

the harmful social norm, as well as the connections of Sahiyo’s five co-founders to the Bohra community. The resulting [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 and Community Pressures:

Although most activists are fairly open with their families and friends in regards to their activism, they express feeling 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 perceived correlation between anti-FGC activism and an active attack on the community and faith at large.



Navigating 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 detailing the prevalence of FGC in the Bohra community, as well as its physical and mental consequences on survivors’ health, often results in other Bohra members undermining the impact of FGC.



Islamophobic Concerns:

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 may exacerbate pre-existing Islamophobia, ultimately jeopardizing their community’s well-being.

As a result, advocates who do speak out against FGC often work in isolation, heightening the need for supportive networks. The research also highlights the importance of creating support structures for activists that reduce the risk of social alienation from opposition towards deeply rooted, harmful social norms like FGC.

In response to this pressing need, Sahiyo launched its Activists Retreat program in 2018, providing survivors and community members with opportunities to connect, build support systems, and lead efforts to end FGC.

From 2023 to 2025, with support from the ARP funding, Sahiyo broadened the scope of its Activists Retreats program, extending participation beyond its initial focus on Bohra activists to include individuals from other impacted API and MENA communities. This decision was informed by Sahiyo’s connections with survivors in the U.S. from Indonesian, Singaporean, Malaysian, and Egyptian

diaspora populations who had previously participated in Sahiyo’s programming and storytelling initiatives, who had expressed a clear demand for greater inclusion. Recognizing that FGC transcends cultural boundaries and that survivors and advocates from diverse backgrounds often face shared challenges such as social isolation, stigma, and limited access to resources, Sahiyo broadened its focus. This expansion reflects the organization’s commitment to fostering cross-community solidarity, amplifying a wider spectrum of voices, and encouraging collaborative, culturally responsive approaches to address and end FGC.

Since the program’s inception, Sahiyo has organized nine retreats in the U.S., equipping 129 individuals from diverse backgrounds—including various age groups, education levels, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic locations—with the tools and resources to drive change.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The expanded ARP Activists Retreat program design included three main goals:

1

To create inclusive, safe, and supportive spaces for API and MENA FGC survivors and impacted community members in the U.S. so they can break the cycle of silence and break the sense of isolation that exists surrounding FGC and focus on healing from their experiences.

2

To prevent FGC among future generations through advocacy, education, and outreach.

3

To increase the collective impact of FGC prevention and support work in the South Asian Dawoodi Bohra community, and other API and MENA communities in the U.S. and create a critical mass of voices speaking out against FGC, strengthening the anti-FGC survivor network



ACTIVISTS RETREAT PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Planning The Retreats

Planning for each retreat begins six months before the start of the event. Since 2018, Sahiyo has convened Planning Committees to ensure that the retreat agenda is survivor-centered and responsive to participant needs. Committees are composed of program alumni who volunteer five to ten hours per month, recruited through direct outreach with an emphasis on diversity across regions, professions, and experiences with FGC. Membership shifts each year to welcome new alumni, while some individuals return to serve on multiple committees, providing both fresh perspectives and continuity. Together, committee members play a central role in shaping retreat priorities and guiding the program's survivor-centered approach.

The committee collaborates with Sahiyo staff to:

- Conduct outreach to potential participants
- Coordinate facilitators and guest speakers
- Develop the retreat agenda and create tools and resources for attendees
- Oversee logistics, including venue and schedule when retreats are in-person

This participatory approach began with the inaugural 2018 retreat, co-created by Sahiyo's U.S. Executive Director, Mariya Taher, and volunteer Alisha Bhagat, both from the Dawoodi Bohra community. Since then, the Planning Committee has become central to ensuring each retreat is shaped by survivor priorities, rooted in community ownership, and built through shared leadership.

Retreat Recruitment

Recruitment of retreat participants has always prioritized safety, trust, and survivor privacy. The retreats are confidential private events, and identifying information about attendees is never shared without explicit permission. Early retreats were not advertised publicly; potential participants were contacted directly through email, word-of-mouth, or messaging and encouraged to share the application link with their trusted networks. Under the ARP grant, Sahiyo began sharing information about the retreat more broadly—without disclosing exact locations. To maintain a safe and supportive environment, all applicants are screened: if someone is not known to any Planning Committee member, a phone interview is conducted to verify identity and ensure the individual is a good fit for the retreat. These measures continue to protect participants from potential retaliation or backlash, particularly in communities where FGC is considered a required social norm.

Applications are reviewed by Sahiyo staff and the Planning Committee, with criteria emphasizing survivor voice, diversity of lived experiences, and a commitment to community mobilization. Bohra-specific retreats include additional criteria to center voices from those historically connected to the Bohra community and ensure participation across ages, geographies, and levels of engagement with FGC-related work. These retreats provide a safe, culturally grounded space where survivors can speak openly, connect with peers who share similar experiences, and develop leadership and advocacy skills. Through this process, cohorts are intentionally intergenerational, globally connected, and reflective of multiple survivor perspectives, while safeguarding participant privacy and fostering a supportive environment for survivor leadership and collaboration.

Core Components of the Retreat

The Activists Retreat program is designed to empower participants through a combination of interactive workshops, expert-led sessions, community building, and actionable goal-setting. Each retreat provides a supportive environment for survivor-advocates and community members to gain knowledge, exchange ideas, and strategize their efforts to address FGC.

1

Workshops and Information Sessions:

Each retreat features interactive workshops and thematic information sessions. Guest speakers, including authors, human rights lawyers, therapists, and sexual health experts, provide diverse perspectives and specialized knowledge on topics related to anti-FGC activism.

2

Community Building:

Participants engage in group discussions, networking activities, and one-on-one conversations to foster connections and mutual support. By creating these bonds, participants build a network of allies and collaborators who strengthen their individual and collective activism.

3

Self-Reflection Opportunities:

Journaling exercises and reflective sessions allow participants to explore their thoughts and experiences. These activities support emotional well-being and help participants align their activism with their personal values and comfort level.

4

Action Planning:

On the final day, participants collaborate to create individualized and group action plans. These plans are tailored to participants' strengths and preferences, whether they engage in private advocacy or public activism. Goals have included starting a Discord community for advocates or contributing to initiatives like Sahiyo's [Dear Maasi](#) blog on sexual health.

Skill Development

Participants gain tools and techniques essential for long-term activism, including:

- Leadership and advocacy strategies.
- Legal knowledge and resources.
- Effective communication skills to discuss FGC in a safe and judgment-free manner
- Strategies for self-care and maintaining safety while engaging in activism.

Expert Connections and Resources

Sahiyo invites guest speakers from various fields, such as psychotherapy, sexual health, legal, and other professionals, to provide specialized knowledge and develop toolkits that participants can utilize in their personal lives and activist efforts. These resources ensure participants are equipped to navigate challenges while advancing efforts to end FGC.

Program Evaluation

Each retreat concludes with a participant survey to gather feedback on their experiences, insights, and recommendations. Sahiyo uses these evaluations to refine future programming and shares these detailed reports with participants, fostering transparency and continuous improvement.

Event Reporting

After each retreat, a comprehensive report documents the program's goals, achievements, and overall impact. The report includes detailed results from program evaluations, providing insights into participant feedback and the effectiveness of the retreat.

This comprehensive structure empowers participants to become impactful advocates while prioritizing their safety, well-being, and personal growth.



ARP ACTIVISTS RETREAT SUMMARIES

Retreat 1: May 13, 2023

Location: Virtual

Number of Participants: 10

Retreat Highlights

U.S.-based Bohra activists participated in a virtual Activists Retreat designed to build and strengthen a network of advocates working to end FGC. The retreat provided a collaborative space for activists to share best practices, exchange insights, and explore tools and resources for anti-FGC advocacy. Participants discussed the challenges they face, identified opportunities for progress, and collectively strategized ways to amplify their impact.

Reflecting on the retreat, participant Umme Kulsoom Arif shared, “I just feel so affirmed and excited to hear people willing and ready to talk about FGC and doing research and bringing it to school curricula.” Their comment highlights the retreat’s empowering effect in fostering dialogue and creating actionable pathways for advocacy.

Following the retreat, a program evaluation was distributed, with four participants completing it. The results were shared with all participants to ensure transparency and to encourage collective learning for future initiatives.





Retreat 2: September 15-17, 2023

Location: Atlanta, Georgia

Number of Participants: 16

Guest Speakers: Dr. Stacia Crochet and Maranatha Genet from [Emory School of Medicine](#) and Nowmee Shehab, former Staff Attorney at [Tahirih Justice Center](#)

Retreat Highlights

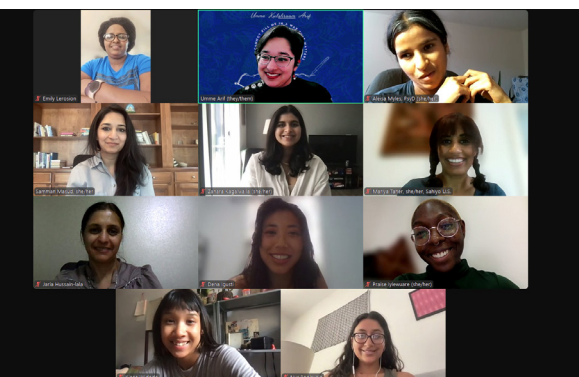
Sahiyo hosted a three-day in-person Activists Retreat in Atlanta, GA, geared towards individuals from the South Asian Bohra community living in the U.S. The 16 participants gained tools for advocacy, explored the importance of self-care, and forged significant connections to further their efforts in ending FGC.

To foster a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment, participants collaborated to establish ground rules centered on respect and confidentiality. Sahiyo also ensured the availability of on-call mental health support to meet participants' needs. One participant, Zehra Patwa, reflected, "A nuanced understanding of why this practice exists is very important," underscoring the retreat's focus on cultural sensitivity and informed advocacy.

The retreat featured key sessions with experts in healthcare and law. Dr. Stacia Crochet, Assistant Professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology (OB-GYN) at Emory University Hospital, along with medical student Maranatha Genet, Resident Physician, presented on FGC in the U.S. healthcare system. This session covered the fundamentals of FGC, available treatment options, and the critical importance of trauma-informed care for survivors.

In another session, Nowmee Shehab, a former staff attorney at the Tahirih Justice Center, led a discussion on the legal landscape of FGC in the U.S. This session explored federal and state laws on FGC, asylum law and protection status for survivors of FGC, and notable criminal cases regarding FGC in Michigan and Texas. Participants also learned about the Tahirih Justice Center's work in supporting survivors of violence through legislative applications and promoting justice.

Following the retreat, a program evaluation was completed by 14 participants, with the results shared among participants to ensure transparency and promote collective growth to inform future retreats.



Retreat 3: July 26-28, 2024

Location: Virtual

Number of Participants: 14

Guest Speakers: Araya Casey from [Free2Luv](#) and Shivangi Misra, the Global Legal Advisor at [Equality Now](#)

Retreat Highlights

In July 2024, Sahiyo piloted an expanded Activists Retreat to include individuals from additional API and MENA FGC-impacted communities, fostering inclusivity and extending support to a broader spectrum of survivors. This virtual retreat brought together 14 participants over three days, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds and gender identities. Among the participants, nine identified as South Asian, two as Southeast Asian, one as Middle Eastern, and two from the Black community.

The retreat provided a valuable platform for participants to exchange culturally responsive advocacy approaches, share strategies tailored to their communities, and explore cross-cultural differences in addressing FGC. Participants examined how culturally specific language, tools, and approaches can be utilized to address FGC within their respective communities while building mutual understanding of the complex landscape of FGC across various regions and traditions.

Participants engaged in educational sessions such as The Importance of Community-Led and Survivor-Led Movements, Communication and Framing on Female Genital Cutting and Social Norms, and a presentation on the legal landscape of FGC in the U.S. by Shivangi Misra, the global legal advisor at Equality Now. A creative self-care workshop led by the award-winning nonprofit Free2Luv incorporated themes of self-care and community-led activism, offering a reflective and restorative experience for participants.

Reflecting on the retreat, Praise Iyiewuare, a 2024 Activists Retreat alum, shared: "I felt very connected to the others in the group and also learned so much about FGM/C in other communities as well as in the U.S. landscape. I was grateful for the self-care activities throughout and for the space to plan out specific action items for goals."

Following the retreat, a program evaluation was distributed, with 12 participants completing it. The results were shared with all participants to ensure transparency and foster collective learning for future retreats.



Retreat 4: February 21-23, 2025

Location: Atlanta, Georgia

Number of Participants: 12

Guest Speakers: Dr. Stacia Crochet and Ariana Traub from [Emory School of Medicine](#) and Doris Mukangu from [Amani Women Center](#)

Retreat Highlights

This retreat was designed to serve the South Asian Bohra community exclusively, creating space for participants to reconnect, share experiences, and strengthen collective healing.

Dr. Crochet provided an insightful update regarding advancements in addressing FGC within the U.S. healthcare sector. Their presentation focused on equipping clinicians and patients with strategies to navigate clinical visits more effectively, highlighting non-judgmental communication techniques as essential tools. The session also featured an interactive discussion on optimizing OB-GYN visits for patients with a history of FGC, encouraging participants to share ideas and collaboratively refine best practices for dealing with such experiences.

During the retreat's action planning session, Sahiyo Board Member and retreat host Dr. Arefa Cassoobhoy teamed up with Dr. Crochet to conceptualize a volunteer project aimed at developing resources that seek to empower survivors of FGC to enter medical spaces as patients with confidence and efficiency.

Guest speaker Doris Munkagu of the Amani Women Center facilitated a button necklace-making workshop inspired by the center's Save Our Sisters Initiative. This guided activity provided participants with a creative outlet to process their retreat experiences. Participants reflected on the lessons learned, expressed gratitude for the connections formed, and celebrated their collective progress. The session fostered a sense of community amongst the retreat cohort, enabling participants to relax, share stories, and strengthen bonds.

The retreat emphasized the transformative power of community-driven advocacy. "Community members have credibility and access to intimate spaces within their groups to propel change. Importantly, when advocates come from within the community, they are able to reclaim power and initiate grassroots-level change," said Zahara Kagalwalla, a 2025 retreat participant.

Following the retreat, a program evaluation was distributed, with 10 participants completing it. The evaluation results were shared with all participants, fostering transparency and collective learning to inform future initiatives.

INCREASING COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND CONNECTION

Feedback from past program participants emphasized a strong desire to maintain connections with the survivors and advocates they met during the retreat, as well as to network and connect with alumni from previous retreats. In response, the Activists Retreat Program established tools that sustained and expanded on these connections: alumni email and text groups, quarterly community meetings, one-on-one engagements, and wellness activities.



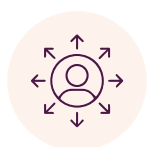
Email and Text Groups

The Activists Retreat alumni listserv and dedicated WhatsApp group were established to facilitate ongoing communication, connection, and act as a support system for alumni. These channels provided a space for exchanging resources, event announcements, and retreat follow-ups, allowing participants to stay informed and engaged.



Quarterly Meetings

Quarterly virtual meetings created opportunities for alumni to reconnect, collaborate, and discuss progress on action plans developed during the retreats. These meetings also served as a platform for participants to share updates, seek guidance, and explore new strategies for their advocacy work.



One-On-One Engagement with Program Coordinator

A Sahiyo coordinator offered personalized support to alumni through one-on-one sessions. These engagements provided space for tailored conversations, ensuring participants had access to the resources and encouragement needed to continue their advocacy journey.



Alumni Wellness Activities

Recognizing that alumni were routinely navigating personal and vicarious trauma resulting from their work on FGC, Sahiyo began an alumni wellness program by partnering with various organizations to foster healing, reduce burnout, and encourage sustainable activism practices. Some of the mental health and wellness offerings during this ARP Activists Retreat program period included:

- **Sahiyo Book Club with Farzana Doctor, author of *Seven*:** On November 9, 2023, 12 alumni joined a thought-provoking discussion with Farzana Doctor, delving into the themes of her award-winning novel *Seven* and its connections to FGC advocacy, patriarchy, and personal agency. The session included an engaging discussion, providing participants with the opportunity to gain deeper insights into the novel and its relevance to the movement to end FGC.
- **Virtual Film Screening of *The Beginning*:** On February 12, 2025, a screening of the film addressing FGC drew 18 participants, followed by a live discussion featuring writer and director Sahiyo Co-Founder Insia Dariwala and Diviya Srinivisan from Equality Now, the organization who produced the film. The event offered valuable insights into the utilization of storytelling as a powerful tool for advancing advocacy and awareness.
- **Free2Luv Art EXPRESSIT! Art x Healing Workshop:** Held on May 8, 2025, this interactive workshop guided alumni in using art as a therapeutic tool for self-expression and healing. Five participants attended, finding new ways to process emotions and build resilience.
- **Virtual Yoga with Communities as One:** Conducted on June 16, 2025, this restorative yoga session focused on mindfulness and stress relief, where four participants sought to enhance their well-being through physical movement and relaxation.

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND DISSEMINATION

Sahiyo introduced a suite of tools and resources during this program period, empowering participants to enhance their knowledge and incorporate these materials into their own healings, learnings, and advocacy works. These tools were refined and adapted from feedback received from activists who attended past retreats.

- **Toolkit for Overcoming Advocacy Challenges:** Provides strategies for individuals to learn how to navigate obstacles they might encounter in their work to address and end FGC in their communities.
- **Guides to Effective Conversations on FGC:** Offers practical advice for engaging in meaningful and impactful discussions on FGC with friends and family impacted by FGC. Sahiyo developed
- **Interactive Timeline of the Bohra Movement to End FGC:** Chronicles the journey and milestones in addressing FGC within the Bohra community.
- **Legal Timeline on FGC in the U.S.:** A comprehensive Legal Timeline on FGC case history in the U.S. to offer legal context and support activists with legal insights and resources for their advocacy efforts.

Digital Resources

To support program participants and Activists Retreat alumni, several publicly available digital resources were generated and adapted for broader use. These resources not only inspire activism but also serve as a bridge for others to learn from their experiences, fostering greater awareness and engagement in the movement to end FGC.

- **Digital Advocacy Guide:** Provides education on effectively leveraging digital platforms to raise awareness and promote activism. Access the guide [here](#).
- **Toolkit on Understanding Bohra Dynamics:** Offers insights into the cultural and social factors that continue to sustain FGC within the Bohra community. Access the toolkit [here](#).
- **2023 Sahiyo Activists Retreat Video:** A YouTube video highlighting the retreat experience and its impact on participants. Watch the video [here](#).
- **Activists Retreat Program Overview (2018-2023):** This summary of the evolution, themes, and key milestones of the Activists Retreat Program across the first five years of the program was published in September 2024. Access the report [here](#).

In addition to these resources, Sahiyo has published four comprehensive impact reports detailing outcomes and learnings from the retreats:

- [Cumulative Activists Retreat Impact Report \(2018-2022\)](#)
- [2023 Sahiyo Activists Retreats Report](#)
- [2024 Sahiyo Activists Retreat Report](#)
- [2025 Sahiyo Activists Retreat Report](#)

a communications guide that is for a broad audience use. Sahiyo also updated a version of this guide, revised to include Bohra-specific dynamics and understanding of cultural attributes that are helpful to be aware of when engaging in conversation on FGC with other Bohra community members.

Program Alumni Digital Advocacy

Retreat alumni continued their advocacy journeys by contributing blogs to the Sahiyo platform, sharing personal insights and experiences:

- [Do I belong? Reflecting on the Activists Retreat](#) (June 2023).
- [Reflecting on the 2023 Activists Retreat](#) (November 2023).
- [Passion, Purpose, Party: My Take on Sahiyo's Activists Retreat](#) (December 2023). There is a related video which can be seen [here](#).
- [A Space to Belong: My Reflection on the 2023 Activist Retreat](#) (April 2024). There is a related video which can be seen [here](#).
- [Reflecting on the Activists Retreat](#) (May 2024).
- [Reflections on the Sahiyo Activist Retreat: A Transformative Experience](#) (December 2024).
- [What Not to Say](#) (January 2025).
- [Reflection on the Sahiyo Activists Retreat 2024: Zahara Kagalwalla](#) (February 2025).
- [You Don't Know How Much You Need It Until It's Over](#) (June 2025).

These resources collectively serve as a foundation for education, outreach, and advocacy, helping participants and supporters contribute to the movement to end FGC while amplifying the voices and experiences of survivors.

STRENGTHENING AND EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR A COLLABORATIVE NETWORK

Through the expansion of the Activists Retreat program from 2023 to 2025, Sahiyo has developed new and impactful partnerships while also strengthening existing collaborations with various stakeholders involved in the movement to end FGC. During the program, the following collaborative relationships were initiated.



Amani Women Center:

A nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering refugee women in Georgia through education, skills training, and health advocacy. The center provides culturally sensitive services, including health workshops, sewing programs, and social support. Learn more about this organization [here](#).



Free2Luv:

A youth empowerment nonprofit that uses art, music, and storytelling to promote self-expression and anti-bullying initiatives. Free2Luv creates safe spaces for young people to connect, build confidence, and embrace diversity. Learn more about this organization [here](#).



Emory School of Medicine:

A prestigious medical school in Atlanta, Georgia, renowned for its innovative research, world-class education, and commitment to improving healthcare. The school emphasizes community engagement and advancing medical knowledge to address global health challenges. Learn more about this organization [here](#).



Communities as One:

A grassroots organization fostering unity and collaboration among diverse communities to address social and health disparities. The group focuses on utilizing meditation, yoga, and other movement-based mindfulness practices to promote equity and collective well-being. Communities as One partnered with Sahiyo to deliver a two-part wellness series to Activists Retreat alumni: a virtual Yoga session in June and a virtual Qigong session in July, to meet the mental health needs of alumni. Learn more about this organization [here](#).



Equality Now:

An international human rights organization focused on ending gender-based violence and discrimination. Through legal advocacy, policy reform, and grassroots support, Equality Now fights for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls worldwide. Learn more about this organization [here](#).



Tahirih Justice Center:

A national nonprofit organization providing legal and social services to immigrant women and girls fleeing gender-based violence. Tahirih works to ensure safety and justice through holistic support, policy advocacy, and community education. Learn more about this organization [here](#).

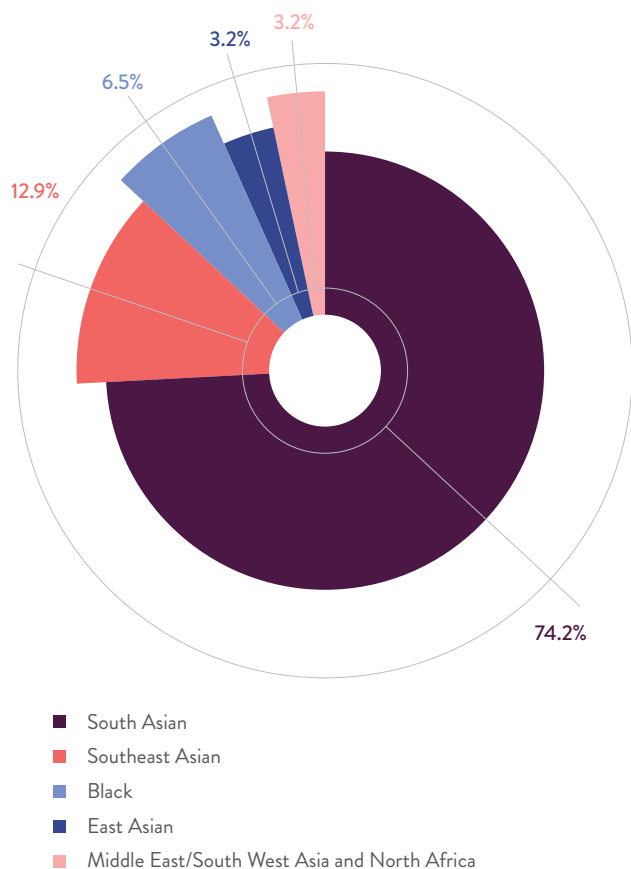
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

From 2023 to 2025, Sahiyo hosted four retreats, engaging 33 unique individuals, with many participating in multiple retreats. This brought the total number of participants since the program's inception in 2018 to 76—a 76.7% increase.

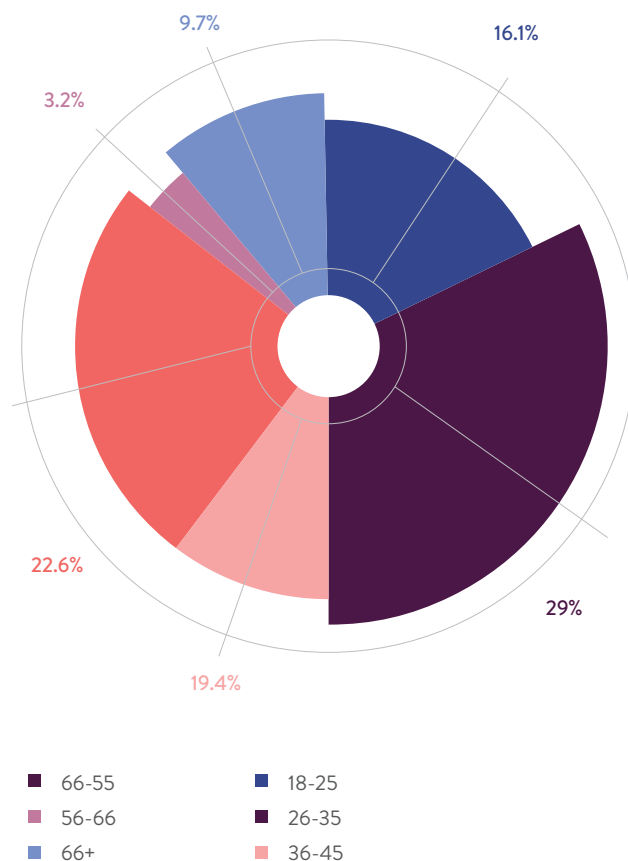
Participants represented a rich diversity of identities and experiences, including survivors, allies, and community advocates from API, MENA communities, with 74% identifying as South Asian. Demographics spanned various age groups, gender identities, geographic locations

across the U.S., and professional backgrounds, enriching discussions and fostering cross-communal understanding. Notably, 94% identified as cisgender women, 55% were survivors of FGC, and 81% were raised in communities where FGC is practiced. These statistics underscore the program's success in reaching those directly impacted and furthering a supportive and empowering network.

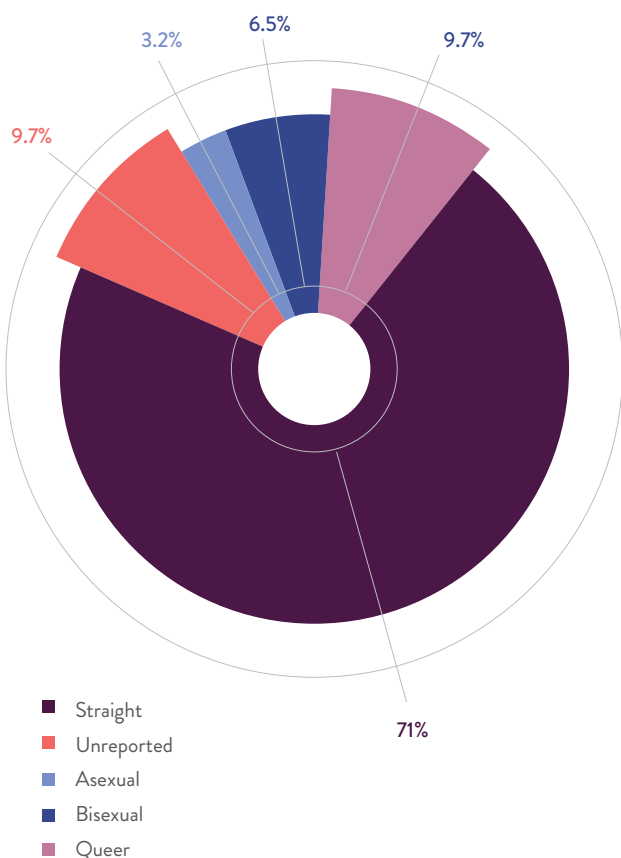
Ethnicity/Race



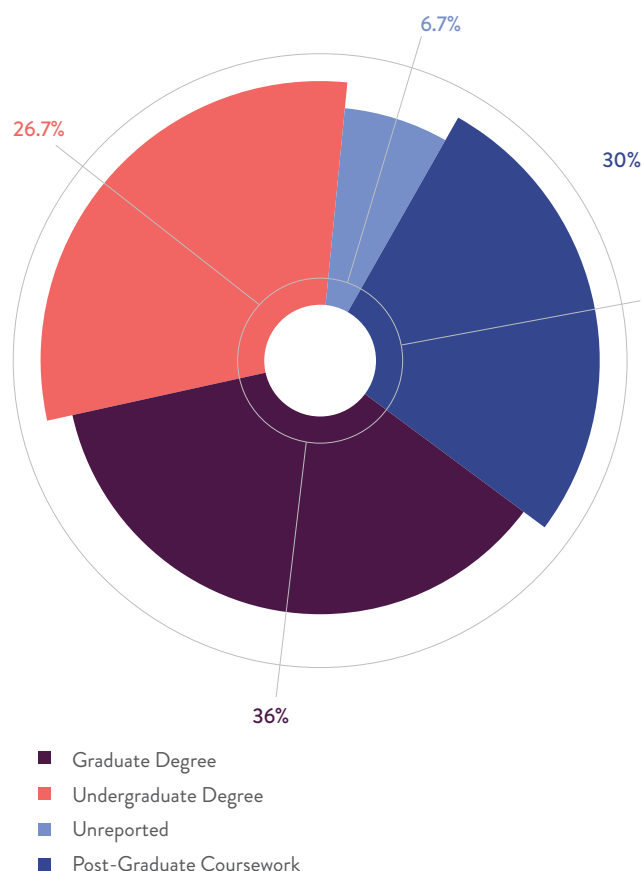
Age Group



Sexual Identity



Education Level



The majority of participants were between the ages of 26 and 45, with over 70% identifying as straight. Additionally, the participants' education levels were predominantly graduate and post-graduate degrees, reflecting a highly educated cohort. This aligns with findings from Sahiyo's 2017 study, [Understanding Female Genital Cutting in the Dawoodi Bohra Community](#), which also highlighted that survivors

of FGC from the Bohra community had high educational levels. This trend in demographics from the 2017 study to this current report reflects that, despite the Bohra community's broader reputation for prioritizing education, as seen in its initiatives to [foster academic excellence globally](#), FGC persists due to a correlation with social identity.

ARP ACTIVISTS RETREAT PROGRAM IMPACT

The ARP Activists Retreat Program has significantly enhanced communication, collaboration, and engagement among survivors and advocates. Key outcomes include a strengthened sense of community, the development of essential skills, and the motivation and empowerment of alumni to engage in impactful action.



Skill Development

Participants developed essential skills in digital advocacy, community outreach, public speaking, and action planning. By the end of the program, 100% of program participants expressed confidence in their ability to apply these tools effectively, affirming that the experience significantly enhanced their capacity to engage in impactful activism.



Motivating and Empowering Alumni

The Activists Retreat has served as a transformative experience, allowing participants to find their voices, share their stories, and lead or engage in impactful action against FGC. For many alumni, the retreat acted as a launching pad, providing the tools, confidence, and support needed to step into advocacy roles. Following the retreats, 90% of participants remained actively involved in anti-FGC efforts, engaging in activities such as media interviews to raise public awareness, serving as research consultants on FGC-related studies, and participating in various state and regional policy briefings.

The program also inspired creative approaches to storytelling and digital advocacy. Since the Activists Retreat program's inception, 18 alumni—including three from the ARP-funded program—have contributed to Sahiyo's [Voices to End FGM/C](#) digital storytelling program, producing videos that have collectively garnered over 10,500 views across various platforms. These powerful narratives amplify survivor voices and broaden public understanding of the impact of FGC. The retreat has empowered alumni to transform their personal experiences into advocacy and education, generating a ripple effect that continues to amplify the movement to end FGC.



Enhanced Community and Connections

As a direct result of the two-year ARP program, Sahiyo established an alumni network that has been expanded to 61 members, creating a strong and enduring community of advocates. This network was developed to ensure that connections formed during the retreats were sustained and strengthened over time. Among the 31 participants who completed the post-retreat evaluation, 100% reported feeling more connected to a community of like-minded individuals.

Key initiatives launched through the ARP program have facilitated ongoing engagement:

- A dedicated WhatsApp group connects 29 alumni, enabling real-time communication.
- An alumni email listserv now reaches all 76 retreat alumni, providing updates, resources, and collaboration opportunities.
- A total of 6 quarterly alumni group meet-ups are held, offering spaces for continued relationship-building and shared learning.
- One-on-one engagements tailored to individual needs have supported 24 alumni, ensuring personalized guidance and encouragement.



KEY INSIGHTS

The Activists Retreat program has enhanced and increased advocacy efforts to end FGC in various ways.



Expansion of the Anti-FGM/C Activist Network

The networking tools and programs developed through the ARP Activists Retreat program—including the alumni email listserv, quarterly meetings, one-on-one support, and wellness events—have empowered alumni to feel more connected, supported, and motivated to remain active in the movement to end FGC. These initiatives have sparked enduring connections among participants, significantly expanding and strengthening the anti-FGC activist network and laying a robust foundation for sustained collaboration and collective impact.

Through these tools and connections, the ARP Activists Retreat program has cultivated a vibrant, resilient network of advocates, united by their shared commitment to creating a future free from this harmful social norm.



Enhanced Mental Health and Well-Being

The Activists Retreats provided survivors and community members with a safe, judgment-free environment to connect with others, share their experiences, and strategize community-led approaches to ending FGC within their families and extended networks. These retreats offered a space for participants to openly discuss the psychosocial and physical impacts of FGC, encouraging understanding, mutual support, and healing.

During this program period, a mental health survey was developed and distributed to the entire alumni of 61 individuals, gathering insights into the impact of the retreat. Survey results demonstrated significant improvements in participants' emotional well-being, attributed to the retreat activities and connections formed. Alumni reported feeling less isolated and more supported, benefiting from the creation of an alumni network that continues to serve as a vital support system. This enhanced sense of community underscores the retreats' lasting impact on mental health and well-being, offering participants the tools necessary to sustain their advocacy efforts with renewed strength and resilience.





Growing Educational and Advocacy Initiatives

Participants consistently leave Sahiyo's Activists Retreats feeling empowered to better address FGC within their families and communities. Alumni have taken on a variety of impactful roles, including:

- Speaking with media outlets to raise awareness about FGC.
- Serving as research consultants on FGC-related projects.
- Organizing and hosting workshops to educate others on FGC.
- Participating in educational outreach campaigns within impacted communities.
- Providing testimony at policy briefings across various states and regions

In 2024, Sahiyo's long-time volunteer and program alumna, Umme Kulsoom, presented their publication on FGC at the Asian American Conference in Seattle, Washington. In their scholarly personal narrative titled "Boxed-In: Considering the Impact of FGM/C on Queerness and Sexuality in the South Asian Diaspora in America", Umme drew on their advocacy work with Sahiyo and explored queer perspectives on FGC. In a blog piece for Sahiyo, [That Old Familiar Violence - Reflecting on AAS 2024](#), Umme discussed their experience at the conference and the lack of research on queer and non-binary survivors of FGC.

Additionally, the retreats have inspired participants to create innovative resources for broader educational and advocacy efforts. For example, Zahara Kagalwalla, a returning participant and retreat planning committee member, is currently developing a public-facing resource that aims to help individuals outside the activist community understand how to engage in advocacy while providing contextual information about the religious and cultural belief systems sustaining FGC within South Asian Bohra communities.

These initiatives emphasize the transformative power of the Activists Retreats in fostering leadership, creativity, and sustained engagement in the movement to end FGC. Through education, storytelling, and community outreach, alumni continue to amplify the movement's reach and impact.



Culturally Sensitive Advocacy and Community Safety

The Activists Retreat program acknowledges that efforts to address FGC within various communities take place against a backdrop of rising Islamophobia in the U.S. To avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes, the retreat centers survivor-led voices and emphasizes the necessary role of nuance and cultural sensitivity in shaping narratives surrounding FGC.

Participants have been intentional in moving away from stigmatizing terms such as "barbaric" or "mutilation" when referring to FGC, as research shows that such phrasing alienates communities and deepens collective shame. Such language has long been weaponized to frame gender-based violence as uniquely tied to Muslim cultural or religious practices, perpetuating Islamophobic stereotypes and justifying discrimination against already marginalized groups. In contrast, retreat participants draw on lived experiences to choose language and advocacy strategies that challenge FGC without ostracizing or 'othering' their communities.

Further, as the program is survivor-led, participants are able to share their stories on their own terms. They are not reduced to bullet points or symbols in political debates but are instead positioned as important, trusted voices capable of engaging directly with their communities—where proponents of FGC may be more open to dialogue with advocates who share their cultural or religious background. The retreat provides space for advocates to refine approaches to address FGC while communicating with broader audiences in ways that do not exacerbate bias and avoid fueling hostility toward Muslim communities.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH, LEARNING, AND REFINEMENT



In-Person Versus Virtual Gatherings

The four retreats hosted during the 2023–2024 period demonstrated the importance of creating spaces where survivors and community members can connect, share experiences, and strategize efforts to end FGC. Both virtual and in-person gatherings proved valuable in fostering these connections, but survey results indicated a clear preference for in-person retreats. Participants found in-person gatherings more effective in building deep interpersonal connections, fostering trust, and avoiding Zoom burnout and fatigue.

Offering a blend of in-person and virtual retreats remains crucial. Virtual gatherings provide flexibility for individuals who face financial, professional, or personal barriers to attending in-person events. Balancing these formats allows Sahiyo to maximize inclusivity while meeting the diverse needs of participants.



Expanding the Activists Retreat Program to Broader Audiences

The success of the 2024 expanded Activists Retreat pilot program highlights the value of engaging diverse voices. By including participants from API and MENA communities alongside Bohra South Asian participants, the retreats enriched discussions and fostered cross-cultural solidarity in the movement to end FGC.

Additionally, interest from activists outside the U.S. underscores the need to expand the program's reach to a global audience. While funding and eligibility criteria have limited international participation, future retreats could explore accommodating individuals from different regions and time zones. This expansion would enhance the program's inclusivity, amplify global perspectives, and create opportunities for cross-border collaboration to address FGC.



The Necessity of Culturally-Specific Safe Spaces

While the 2024 expansion pilot of the Activists Retreat Program proved successful in fostering cross-cultural connections and amplifying diverse voices within the movement to end FGC, it also highlighted an ongoing and critical need for safe, dedicated spaces for Bohra community members. These spaces allow participants to engage with others who share unique cultural, religious, and social experiences tied to FGC, fostering a deeper sense of trust and understanding.

Recognizing this need, Sahiyo hosted a Bohra-specific retreat in February 2025, providing a space tailored to the distinct challenges and perspectives of this community. This decision reflects Sahiyo's commitment to addressing the nuanced needs of the Bohra community while acknowledging the importance of intersectionality within its broader work.

Importantly, the return to a Bohra-specific focus does not mark the end of expanded retreat opportunities for API and MENA communities. Building on the success of the pilot, Sahiyo will continue to host both Bohra-specific and expanded retreats, ensuring that all impacted communities have access to the resources, connections, and support systems they need. This dual approach reinforces the overall impact of the program by providing both specialized and inclusive spaces for survivors and advocates to thrive.





Strengthening Post-Retreat Feedback and Long-Term Impact Assessment

While immediate post-retreat surveys have provided valuable insights, there is an opportunity to strengthen how Sahiyo captures the long-term impact of the Activists Retreat Program. Currently, most feedback focuses on participants' immediate experiences; however, evaluating outcomes at 6–12 months post-retreat would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the program influences participants' activism, healing, and community engagement over time.

Future programming can incorporate structured follow-up assessments with alumni to track sustained impact, particularly around their mental health and well-being. These assessments would help identify ongoing needs, highlight how retreat learnings are being applied, and ensure participants continue to feel supported as they navigate their activism and healing journeys.

By formalizing a long-term evaluation process, Sahiyo can better measure the retreat's effectiveness, refine programming to meet evolving needs, and share powerful data with funders and partners.



Utilizing Alumni Leadership to Enhance Program Growth

Looking ahead, the retreat program continues to explore ways to sustain its impact and strengthen the activist network. Formalizing leadership roles for alumni, such as peer mentors or facilitators, could foster ongoing support and provide participants with guidance on engaging in anti-FGC advocacy initiatives. Creating these opportunities would allow alumni to remain actively involved, share lessons from previous campaigns and projects, and help scale the program in an organic, sustainable way.



Sustaining the Program: Building Funding Support

The success of the four retreats organized with current funding underscores the transformative power of the Activists Retreat Program. To build on this momentum and expand its impact, additional funding is critical. With increased resources, Sahiyo can host more frequent in-person workshops, which are proven to foster trust and collaboration among participants, and extend opportunities to international activists eager to join the program and the growing network of alumni. Together, we can ensure the program continues to empower survivors and advocates while advancing the global movement to end FGC.





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