sahiyo
United Against Female Genital Cutting

NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Survivor Experiences and the Political Dynamics of Advocacy

A Listening Session Report

July 2026

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes insights from a two-hour virtual listening session with eight survivors of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) who reside across the United States and who have engaged in or explored policy advocacy at the local, state, or federal level. The session aimed to understand survivors' experiences within policy spaces better and to identify ways to strengthen trauma-informed approaches to support survivors' participation in legislative engagement.

Participants shared that policy advocacy can be both meaningful and emotionally demanding. While many described a strong sense of purpose in sharing their experiences to inform policy change, they also highlighted significant emotional labor, particularly when recounting personal experiences in formal or unresponsive environments. Experiences of disbelief, dismissiveness, and rigid procedural structures were noted as contributing to this burden.

A central theme was the importance of survivor-safe spaces and peer connection. Participants consistently emphasized that relationships with other survivors provided emotional grounding, encouragement, and a sense of shared understanding that supported continued engagement in advocacy work.

The session also highlighted that policy outcomes are shaped by broader structural and political dynamics, including party alignment, institutional priorities, and legislative timing. Participants noted that these factors often carried more influence than the content of survivor testimony itself, underscoring the complexity advocates and survivors face in navigating policy systems.

Additionally, participants reflected on gaps in preparation and support for entering policy spaces. Many expressed a desire for clearer orientation to how legislative processes work, what engagement may involve, and what emotional and procedural challenges may arise. Participants also emphasized the importance of trauma-informed engagement from legislators and staff, noting that small procedural adjustments can meaningfully improve the experience of testimony.

Overall, the listening session points to the need for more trauma-informed, accessible, and transparent policy engagement practices. Strengthening preparation for survivors, building peer support networks, improving institutional responsiveness, and increasing clarity around political and procedural processes can all contribute to more meaningful and supportive engagement in policy advocacy spaces.

Introduction

On January 7, 2026, Sahiyo held a survivor listening session titled "Policy Advocacy Experiences From Survivors of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting." This report presents key reflections and themes from that listening session, uplifting survivor perspectives on engaging in policy and legislative advocacy, with particular attention to the emotional, structural, and political dynamics that shape these experiences.

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a human rights violation condemned by both the United Nations and the World Health Organization. Protecting survivors and at-risk girls from FGM/C requires advancing policy solutions that may include criminal penalties and civil liabilities at a systemic level. When advancing such policy solutions, centering survivors' lived experiences—often shared through public testimony—can help convey the long-term mental, physical, and sexual health impacts of this form of gender-based violence.

Sahiyo invited survivors who have engaged in policy advocacy to address FGM/C within the United States to share their experiences navigating legislative processes, including providing public hearings and testimony. Discussion topics included sharing experiences within the legislative systems, the accessibility of these processes, and the types of social support that can enable more informed and sustained participation.

The listening session also aimed to better understand whether and how survivor testimony is received, and how survivors experience sharing deeply personal narratives in policy spaces. Overall, it sought to document survivor perspectives on whether their experiences are met with respect and care, and to surface opportunities to improve how policy processes engage with and support survivors of FGM/C, and more broadly, survivors of gender-based violence.

In this report, policy advocacy refers to survivors' engagement with legislative and policy processes, including but not limited to providing public testimony, meeting with legislators and their staff, and participating in broader community coalition building and systems-level legislative efforts aimed at shaping policy change.



[1]United Nations Population Fund. (n.d.). Female genital mutilation. UNFPA. https://www.unfpa.org/female-genital-mutilation
[2]World Health Organization. (2025, January 31). Female genital mutilation. WHO. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation

About Sahiyo

Sahiyo was formed in 2015 as a survivor-led collective of Asian and other communities impacted by FGM/C to address the lack of recognition of FGM/C as a form of gender-based violence and child abuse impacting women and girls in the United States.

Sahiyo empowers underrepresented communities to engage in shaping FGM/C discourse and supports efforts to create systemic change to end this centuries-long harmful practice. Through collaborative grassroots campaigns and storytelling, Sahiyo supports community members in leading awareness and change efforts.

Sahiyo also works with government stakeholders to support policy-level change addressing FGM/C at the global, national, state, and local levels. This includes engaging with legislative processes and contributing to efforts that shape how FGM/C is understood and addressed within policy contexts.

Central to Sahiyo's policy-related work is the belief that meaningful and sustainable change requires policies and laws that are informed by and developed in partnership with impacted communities, which includes elevating survivor voices and ensuring that lived experiences inform how policy processes are designed, implemented, and experienced.

Objectives

To learn from the experiences of survivors who have engaged in policy advocacy work and to encourage the development of trauma-informed tools for legislators and public organizations working with survivors across gender-based violence fields. Findings will help to inform the creation of a culturally sensitive and respectful environment where impacted community members can safely share their experiences of gender-based violence without retraumatization.

Methodology

The two-hour virtual listening session brought together participants who reside across the United States. Registration was required to help maintain participant confidentiality and support a safe and respectful environment. Two Sahiyo staff members facilitated the session, and a mental health care provider was available on standby to support participants should any part of the discussion become emotionally difficult or triggering. In total, eight participants attended the listening session.

The session began with activities focused on building trust before delving into deeper discussion topics. Following introductions, the facilitators provided an overview of the session and its purpose, outlined guiding principles, established ground rules for discussion, and reviewed confidentiality guidelines.

Facilitators then guided participants through a series of discussion questions, including:

- *How do you define policy advocacy, or what comes to mind when you hear the words?*
- *If you have participated in policy advocacy, what parts of the process have you found difficult or challenging?*
- *Is there anything you found enjoyable about policy work?*
- *Do you feel knowledgeable about or interested in the legislative process?*
- *Do you feel that you would know where and who to turn to if you want to engage in the legislative process?*
- *Do you have any guidance, both for legislative officials listening to stories related to FGM/C, and for survivors sharing their experiences?*
- *How can organizations better support others engaging in policy advocacy work?*
- *What does being prepared for policy engagement mean to you?*

To analyze the themes of the discussions, the full transcript of the listening session was reviewed, and subjects that frequently surfaced in the conversation were identified by coders. Two individuals initially suggested themes in the transcript, which were then reviewed by a third coder for concurrence, followed by a final review by the research team to ensure clarity and accuracy.

Key Concepts: Navigating the Political Landscape

To effectively participate in legislative advocacy, survivors must often decode a "hidden curriculum"—the unstated rules, procedural structures, and political dynamics that shape policy outcomes. This section defines key terminology referenced throughout this report to provide clarity for new advocates and stakeholders alike. By clarifying these concepts, we aim to make policy spaces more transparent and accessible, ensuring that survivors are better prepared for the nuances of political engagement.

- **Policy Advocacy:** The deliberate process of engaging with legislative systems to shape laws and policies. This includes providing public testimony, meeting with legislators and their staff, and participating in coalition-building to advance systemic change.
- **Trauma-Informed Engagement:** A framework for legislative interaction that

prioritizes the safety and emotional well-being of survivors. It involves procedural adjustments designed to minimize re-traumatization and ensure that the process of sharing one's story is respectful and accessible

- **Party Alignment:** The tendency for legislative outcomes to be driven by political party affiliations and agendas rather than the specific substance of the issue at hand. Understanding this helps survivors manage expectations regarding how their testimony might be received by different sides of the aisle.
- **Institutional Priorities:** The internal agendas and focus areas of government bodies. Legislative bodies often balance competing issues, and understanding an institution's current priorities can help advocates align their efforts for greater impact.
- **Legislative Timing:** The strategic or bureaucratic scheduling of bills, hearings, and meetings. Policy success is often dictated by the "political window" of when a bill is introduced or debated, which is distinct from the moral urgency of the issue.
- **Coalition Building:** The practice of uniting different organizations, survivors, and stakeholders to present a collective front. This is often the most effective way to amplify survivor voices and influence policy outcomes against competing political priorities.

Scope and Considerations

A small number of participants took part in this listening session, and therefore, the findings do not represent the full range of experiences among survivors of FGM/C who have engaged in policy advocacy processes in the United States. The participant pool was also shaped by the relatively limited number of survivors who have had opportunities to engage directly in legislative or policy work, as well as by participants' comfort levels in sharing personal experiences in a group discussion setting. Despite these considerations, the findings offer valuable insight into the barriers, needs, and supports that can help make policy engagement more accessible, trauma-informed, and supportive for survivors of female genital mutilation/cutting, and may apply to survivors of other forms of gender-based violence as well.

LISTENING SESSION THEMES

1. Contextualization by Identity
2. Dehumanization Aspect of the Legislative Process
3. The Importance of Survivor Safe Spaces and Interpersonal Support
4. The Political Dynamics of Policy Advocacy
5. Gaps Between Testimony and Actual Influence
6. Emotional Tolls Built into the System
7. Advocacy as Skill-building and Learning over Time

The following sections outline the key themes and insights gathered from the listening session, reflecting FGM/C survivors' experiences engaging with policy advocacy. These themes highlight common barriers, challenges, and supports identified by participants across their legislative engagement.

Theme 1: Contextualization by Identity

One common takeaway among survivors was that the policy engagement experience was varied and contextualized by the individual's identity. With key differences like location, race, and gender identity, survivors all had unique experiences informed by their demographics.

For example, one participant grappled with the complicated feelings surrounding sharing their story, but simultaneously not wanting to further marginalize their community:

"There is also the consistent fear of my advocacy pointing an arrow towards my community. Am I arming people who are hateful, racist, who are going to use this as a means to further marginalize?"

Another survivor described facing challenges related to stereotypes and assumptions about who can be a survivor of FGM/C, alongside difficulties engaging in policy advocacy in the U.S. South:

"I'm female, but I definitely do not match people's idea of who a survivor would be of FGM/C. So I also met a lot of challenges with that... Most of the legislators in Kentucky were conservative, and... I came up against fighting religious freedom and parental rights... I had a couple of legislators ask me to 'prove' that I had been a survivor of FGM/C."

Survivors further described the intersection between identity and advocacy in relation to protecting their communities from stigma. Some expressed concern that participating in advocacy could unintentionally reinforce harmful stereotypes and be used in racist, Islamophobic, or anti-immigrant narratives. Additionally, survivors' willingness to speak publicly was shaped by these fears.

Theme 2: The Dehumanizing Aspects of the Legislative Process

Overwhelmingly, many participants described the experience of sharing their stories in policy settings as dehumanizing. The feeling that the process was impersonal was a common one; one participant described being treated like, "A puppet on stage."

Another referenced an incident where legislators wandered in and out during her testimony in a show of frustrating disregard for her vulnerability.

For many of the survivors, the process of policy advocacy has disappointingly felt more like a performance (for people whose motives were more political than genuine), making it difficult to want to continue to share their stories publicly. They emphasized that this dynamic was likely due to the way legislative spaces were structured. Survivors felt that their role was to provide emotional testimony, and the decision-making side became detached from their lived experiences.

Theme 3: The Importance of Survivor Safe Spaces and Interpersonal Support

All participants shared that the primary, and sometimes motivating, positive aspect of policy work is their bond with other survivors. Despite the challenges of sharing their stories, participants expressed appreciation for the supportive community that comes with survivor advocacy; with such a vulnerable topic, feeling uplifted by others in the shared space was described as instrumental to emotional well-being. For many, these spaces have been essential, forming a foundation for continued participation in advocacy despite negative or discouraging experiences in policy environments.

> *"I don't think I would have made it without the community that formed around me and the people that I've met and other survivors."*

Theme 4: The Political Dynamics of Policy Advocacy

Participants repeatedly mentioned that policy advocacy is deeply shaped by political dynamics rather than solely by the urgency or moral weight of an issue. Many survivors expressed surprise at how much legislative outcomes were influenced by political factors such as party alignment, sponsorship, competing policy priorities, institutional relationships, and the timing and structure of hearings or meetings.

> *"It wasn't so much about the issue... it was which side of the fence you were on."*

Support for FGM/C-related legislation was often shaped by broader political considerations rather than the substance of survivor testimonies. In some cases, participants shared that these dynamics could overshadow the issue itself, with advocacy efforts becoming entangled in broader debates or political priorities not directly related to FGM/C, including instances where FGM/C was referenced in discussions about gender-affirming care.

Theme 5: Gaps Between Testimony and Actual Influence

There were a few participants who felt there was a limit to the influence public testimony provides compared to other forms of advocacy. Many described hearings as strictly procedural or performative, where there were limited forms of engagement of legislators.

"Most of them didn't even catch my eye... it didn't seem like they were paying attention."

This disconnect led some participants to question the true purpose and impact of their testimony as personal experiences were shared without acknowledgement from policymakers. Many stated that other forms of advocacy, such as private meetings, relationship building, coalition coordination, and continued engagement with legislative staff, had a more meaningful influence on their goals.

Theme 6: Emotional Tolls Built into the System

Another theme that emerged was that advocacy requires significant emotional labor, particularly due to the repeated retelling of traumatic experiences in environments that are not always respectful or responsive.

Many participants described experiences of disbelief, dismissiveness, or a lack of attention from policymakers, which further contributed to the emotional burden of advocacy. This burden was also intensified by the expectation to remain composed while repeatedly articulating personal experiences in formal settings.

While many experiences were challenging, participants also noted examples of supportive practice. For instance, in Maryland, the two-minute testimony timer was turned off while survivors were speaking, allowing them to fully share their stories without interruption. This was described as a meaningful gesture of respect that helped build trust between survivors and legislators, demonstrating how small procedural adjustments can have a significant positive impact.

Theme 7: Advocacy as Skill-building and Learning over Time

Finally, participants explained that political advocacy is an evolving learning process. Many stated that their knowledge of political systems, strategy, and effective engagement developed gradually through experience advocating through the system, as there was a lack of structured guidance when they first entered advocacy spaces. As a result, much of their understanding of policy processes and effective engagement strategies was developed through trial and error.

The main methods of advocacy learning were through mentorship, coalition participation, and repeated exposure to policy spaces.

"There's definitely a hidden curriculum when it comes to policy advocacy."



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Preparation to Enter the Policy Advocacy Space
2. Training Legislators on Trauma-Informed Engagement
3. Building Networks of Support
4. Reducing Structural and Logistical Barriers to Participation
5. Clarifying How Political and Institutional Processes Shape Outcomes

Based on the themes and insights gathered during the listening session, the following recommendations are presented to improve the experience, accessibility, and support for FGM/C survivors engaging in policy advocacy. These suggestions aim to promote more trauma-informed and transparent engagement practices across legislative processes.

Preparation to Enter the Policy Advocacy Landscape

Many participants shared that they wish they had been more prepared before engaging in policy advocacy. While the experience can be meaningful, it can also be emotionally and structurally challenging, and should be approached with informed awareness to support the well-being of survivors.

Processes could include the development of accessible orientation materials or guides for new advocates that outline what policy engagement typically looks like, including potential emotional, procedural, and political dynamics. These resources could also incorporate testimonies from individuals who have engaged in policy advocacy to provide real-world insight into the process.

Such preparation intends to ensure that survivors of gender-based violence have the resources, knowledge, and support needed to enter policy spaces with a clear understanding of what engaging in policy spaces may involve.

Training Legislators on Trauma-Informed Engagement

Participants frequently described experiences of dismissiveness or lack of responsiveness in policy spaces, highlighting the need for greater awareness among legislators and staff. Providing educational materials and guidance to legislators before meetings, hearings, and testimony sessions could help strengthen respectful and responsive engagement with constituents.

Policy advocacy is a daunting experience, and creating trauma-informed training for legislators can help ensure that constituents who may also be survivors of violence are met with diligence, respect, and empathy.

Building Networks of Support

Participants consistently emphasized that connection with other survivors is one of the most meaningful and sustaining aspects of policy engagement. These relationships provide emotional grounding, encouragement, and a sense of shared purpose, particularly when navigating challenging or discouraging policy environments.

The sense of connection among individuals involved in policy advocacy is critical to the survivor's well-being.

Creating opportunities for camaraderie across the policy advocacy sphere for those who have been involved in policy advocacy can only strengthen their resolve to remain engaged in policy advocacy; building community is what allows us to create change and sustain change.

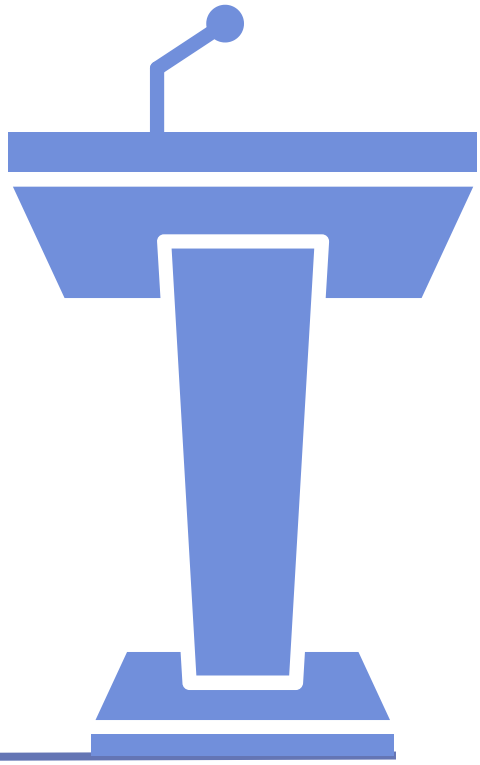
Reducing Structural and Logistical Barriers to Participation

Given that relatively few survivors currently engage directly in policy advocacy spaces, intentional efforts are needed to reduce barriers to participation, including addressing logistical constraints such as travel, scheduling, accessibility, and timing of hearings or meetings.

Clear communication about policy processes, expectations, and pathways for engagement can also help make participation more accessible. Increasing transparency around how decisions are made and when advocacy is most impactful may further support meaningful engagement.

Clarifying How Political and Institutional Processes Shape Outcomes

Participants highlighted that policy outcomes are often shaped by broader political dynamics, institutional priorities, and legislative timing, rather than the urgency or content of survivor testimony alone. Providing greater transparency about these factors can help advocates better understand how policy decisions are made. For example, transparency can include clarifying how factors such as party alignment, sponsorship, competing priorities, and session schedules influence whether and how legislation moves forward. Greater understanding of these structures may help set realistic expectations and support more strategic engagement.



Conclusion

Insights gathered from this listening session underscore that for policy advocacy to be truly impactful and sustainable, it must center the well-being and lived experiences of FGM/C survivors. While survivors possess a powerful drive for change, navigating legislative systems often requires immense emotional labor within environments that are frequently procedural and dehumanizing. The recommendations presented—focused on systemic preparation, trauma-informed legislative practices, and robust support networks—provide a path forward for Sahiyo and its partners to encourage a policy landscape that is more accessible, respectful, and effective in harnessing the transformative power of survivor voices.



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