

ACTIVISTS RETREATS PROGRAM OVERVIEW

2018 - 2023

Needs Statement

Female genital cutting (FGC) or khatna as it is known in the Bohra community, a South Asian Muslim community, is practiced discreetly; and speaking about it in public – particularly expressing dissent against it – is widely considered a taboo in the Bohra community and other FGC practicing communities, and can result in communal ostracism. People fear the stigmatization of their families, as well as the loss of social and professional bonds and/or access to religious privileges. For some, these potential social repercussions prevent them from speaking out against FGC.

Advocates who do speak out against FGC often work in isolation from one another. Though well-intentioned, a lack of knowledge or misinformation on FGC and a lack of understanding of how to work nonjudgmentally with the community, can result in activists' efforts proving more harmful than helpful in bringing an end to FGC.

We know that the more people who speak out against the practice, the increased likelihood of FGC being abandoned. Finding methods to support advocates is vital to our work of ending FGC.

Program Goals

The primary aim of the Activists Retreat is to bring together 'activists' speaking out against FGC, people who work either publicly or privately (anonymously) to raise community awareness about the need to end this harmful practice.

The goals of the Activist Retreat are as follows:

- Build a network of Bohra activists empowered to advocate for the end of FGC
- Create a support system among Bohra activists working to empower their community to abandon FGC
- Develop a safe space for individuals to learn more about the issue of FGC
- Build individuals' overall capacity to engage in activism, including sharing knowledge, resources, and networks
- Sustain post-retreat continued engagement to end FGC

Program Activities

Pre-Event

Planning for a retreat begins six months before the start of the retreat itself. Since 2018, Sahiyo has assembled planning committees to ensure the agenda of the retreats meets the needs of participants. Committee members consist of former Sahiyo program participants who volunteer and commit to 5 to 10 hours a month. Planning involves the following:

- Outreach to potential participants
- Coordinate facilitators and guest speakers
- Coordinate logistics for where and when to host the retreat
- Creating tools and resources to provide participants

Event

Each retreat follows this structure:

DAY 1

Community Building

DAY 2

**Conversations around FGC,
activism and self-care**

DAY 3

**Action planning to achieve
personal and community goals
related to FGC activism**

Content can come in formats such as workshops, information sessions, reflection periods, group discussions, networking opportunities, and action planning

Program Impact

The Activists Retreat program serves to strengthen connections and foster networks among survivors and affected community members, even when they are geographically dispersed. This initiative not only facilitates the sharing of best practices and tools during the retreat but also sustains this exchange throughout the year. Consequently, FGC survivors and affected community members have reported significant improvements in their mental health and overall well-being. Participants have also seen a notable increase in their advocacy skills, enabling them to effectively raise awareness about FGC within their communities. They have gone on to organize and host workshops on FGC, actively participate in outreach campaigns in impacted communities, provide valuable testimonies at policy briefings regarding FGC in various states, and engage in other impactful activities.

Program Impact by the Numbers

2018-2023

87

activists from across the
U.S., Canada, and
England

6

retreats hosted

64%

of past participants
stayed engaged in anti-
FGC advocacy

33

blogs written by retreat
attendees

4

alumni supported the
launch of the Bhaiyo
program

13

attendees also took part
in the Voices to End
FGM/C project

Looking Forward

Sahiyo U.S. hopes to expand the scope of Activists Retreat program as follows:

- Increase the number of retreats (virtual and in-person) hosted annually
- Expand in-person retreats outside of the United States
- Provide long-term support throughout the year to attend the Activists Retreats
- Create additional tools/resources based on the needs of attendees
- Include additional API (Asian and Pacific Islander) and SWANA (South West Asian and North African) FGC-impacted populations outside the Bohra community
- Invite additional non-U.S.-based attendees to participate in virtual retreats
- Customize retreats to be in-person and/or hybrid virtual/in-person formats, to provide higher quality support and relationship-building
- Strengthen the alumni network of retreat participants by building out the program to include additional events and activities post-Activists Retreat

Disclaimer

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