

Sahiyo Activist Needs Assessment Key Findings



Agenda



- **Project Background**
- Demographics & Ties to FGC
- Motivation to Become an Activist
- Impact of Activism on Family & Friends
- Current Outlets for Speaking Out & Challenges Faced
- Current Resources and Hopes for the Future

Research objectives focused on understanding unmet needs of anti-FGC activists to identify priority activism resources for Sahiyo to develop and distribute

Primary Objectives



- Understand challenges and unmet needs of anti-FGC activists, focusing on barriers to speaking publicly about their experience
- Develop and prioritize an actionable list of resources Sahiyo can develop and distribute that will aid the activist and their supporting community

Research Objectives



- **Activist Needs Assessment (Quant):** A quantitative online survey to explore unmet needs in the anti-FGC activist community across multiple countries
 - Understand what motivated activists to become involved
 - Evaluate barriers to speaking publicly against FGC in multiple spheres; individual, family/friend, community, media
 - Assess activist impressions of their family and friends' biggest concerns about their activism
 - Evaluate currently used resources, desired resources and how potential new resources might enhance activists' involvement
- **Deep-Dive of Activist Needs (Qual):** Further investigate resource gaps identified in the online quantitative survey and discuss preferred resources requested through interviews with activists
 - Uncover emotional, environmental and social aspects that limit activists
 - Identify and further understand resource gaps and leverage points that Sahiyo can target for resource development

Research utilized an online survey as well as follow-up interviews to provide comprehensive insight into activists' challenges and unmet needs

Quantitative Online Survey



Qualitative Activist Interviews



1

Characteristics of and Motivation to Become an Activist

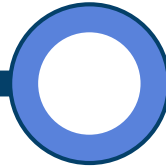


→ Background of activist and motivation/interest:

- Country, profession and age of activist
- Rationale for becoming an activist with Sahiyo or independently
- Interest in participating in various activist roles

2

Challenges Speaking Against FGC



→ Challenges faced as an activist

- Barriers at the individual, family/friend, community and media levels
- Language as barrier
- Speaking anonymously vs. using one's identity

3

Concerns of Family and Friends

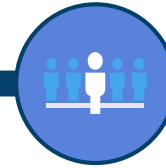


→ Activists' perceptions of family and friend concerns

- Emotions felt by family/friends when speaking about FGC
- Fears that family/friends have for the activist
- Difficulties family/friends have supporting activists
- What might make family/friends feel more comfortable supporting activists

4

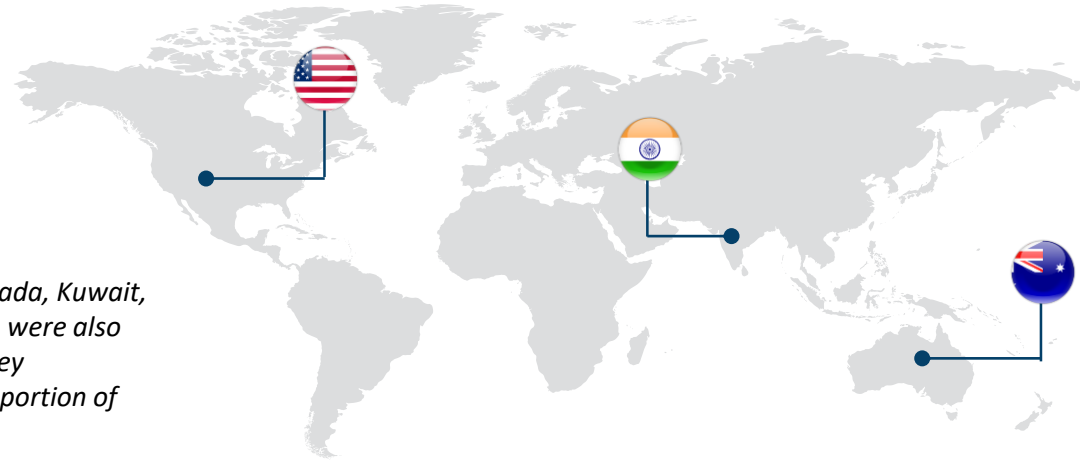
Current Support Used and Desired Support



→ Review currently used resources and desired resources

- Resources that have been helpful in speaking publicly against FGC on one's own
- Resources that have been helpful in working with an organization
- Desired support (unaided)
- Evaluation of potential support resources (aided)

Research included ~40-50 activists across the globe, 7 of whom also participated in follow-up telephone conversations



Activists from UK, Canada, Kuwait, Australia, and Bahrain were also surveyed; however, they represented a smaller portion of the sample

Activist Criteria

- Over 18 years old and of sound mind and health, agrees to participate in research, identifies as an "activist"
- **Activist** - Any person who was born into or grew up in the Dawoodi Bohra religious tradition, and who are now active in speaking against FGM/C (Khatna/Khafd) by:
 1. Belonging to an anti-FGC activists group (Sahiyo or WeSpeakOut or another group) **and/or**
 2. Showing interest during their adult lives in working in any capacity - big or small - towards ending the practice of FGC.

Quantitative Survey – 20 min. online

	# of Respondents
Activists	40-50

Qualitative Interview – 30 min. over phone/skype

	# of Respondents
Activists opting in from survey	7

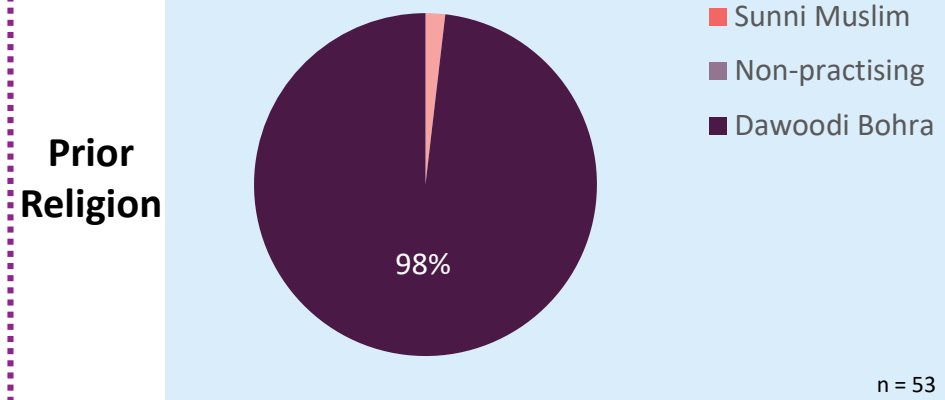
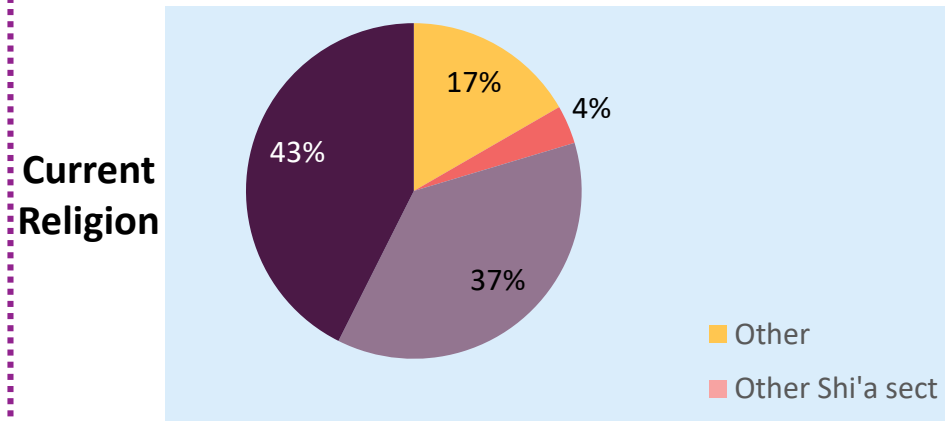
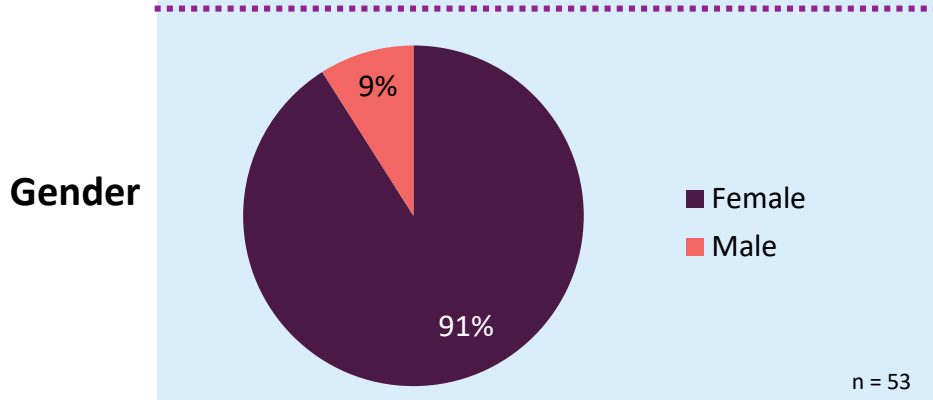
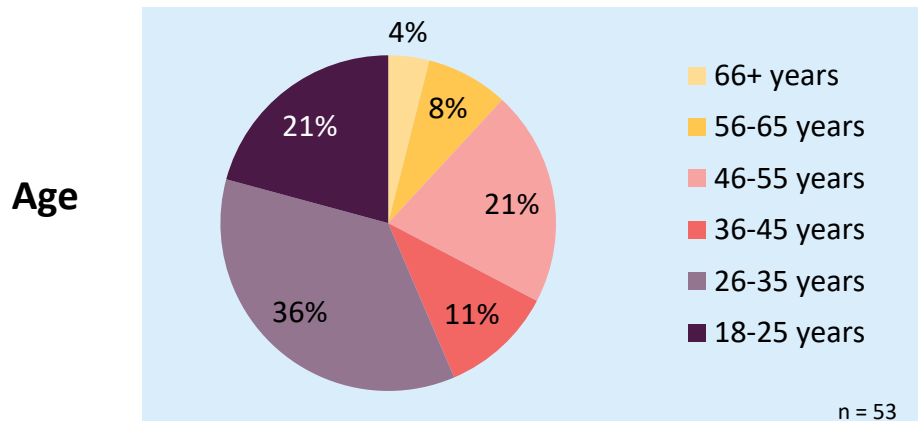
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The majority of activists surveyed were females under the age of 35, and were raised as practicing Dawoodi Bohras

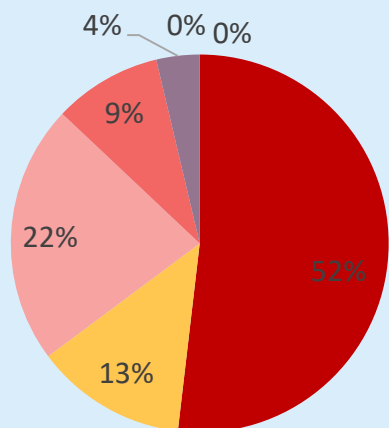
Activist Demographics



The activists surveyed were highly educated, and the majority currently live in India or the United States

Activist Demographics

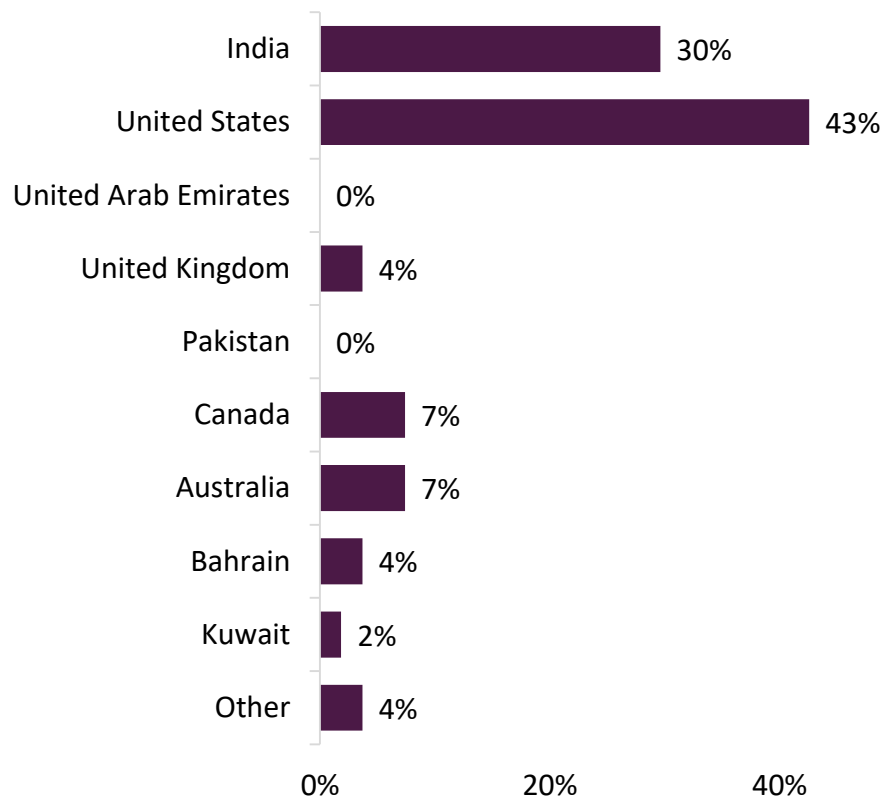
Education Level



- Completed Post-graduate degree (MD, JD, Masters or Ph.D.)
- Some Post-graduate degree (MD, JD, Masters or Ph.D.)
- Completed Graduate degree (B.Sc., B.A., etc.)
- Some Graduate degree (B.Sc., B.A., etc.)
- Completed Secondary School (8-12)
- Some Secondary School (8-12)
- Some Primary and Middle School (KG-7)

n = 54

Country of Residence

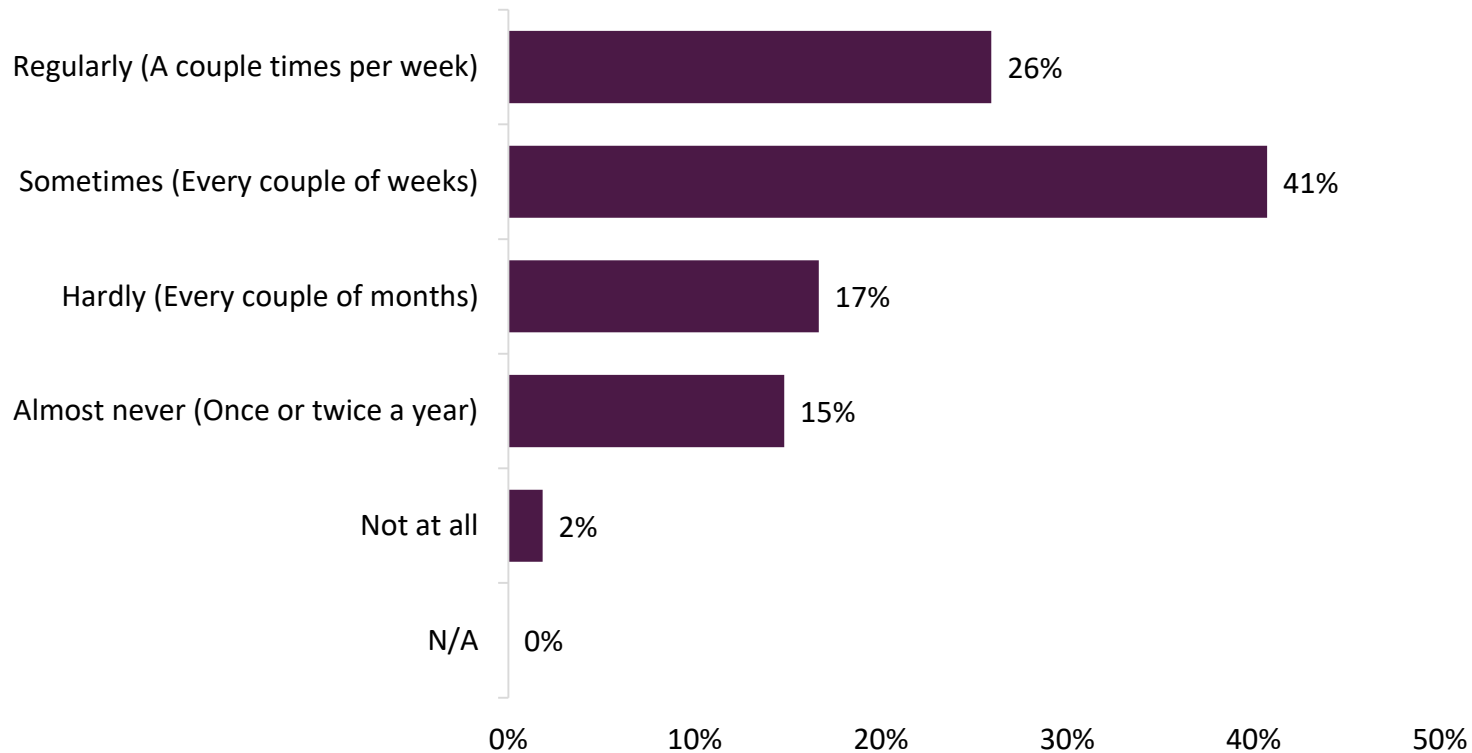


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The majority of activists surveyed socialize with Dawoodi Bohras at least sometimes, with about a quarter socializing with Dawoodi Bohras regularly

Activist Demographics

Socializing with Dawoodi Bohras

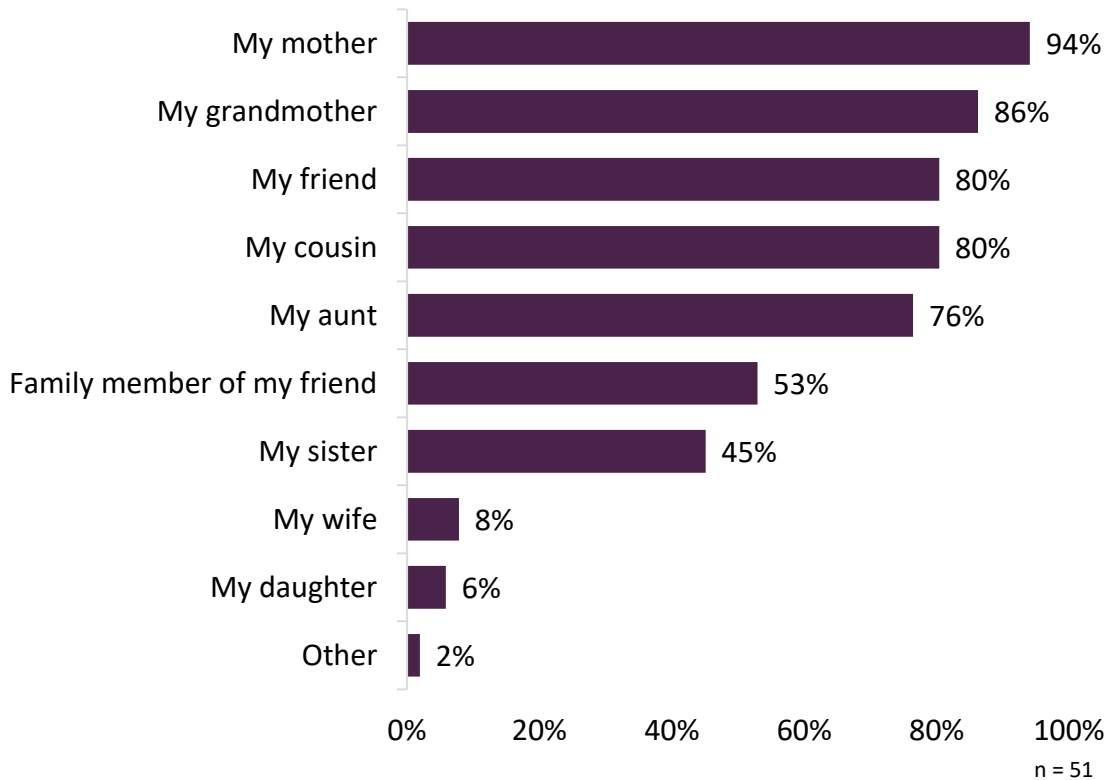


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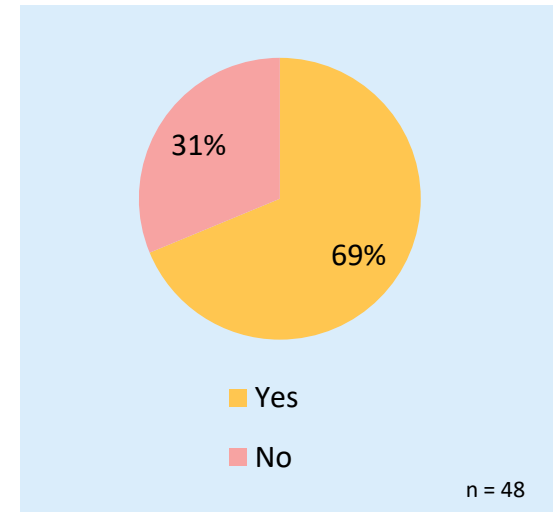
Nearly all activists had a mother and grandmother undergo FGC, and almost three-quarters of activists surveyed underwent FGC personally

Activist Demographics

Family and Friends who have Undergone FGC



Respondents who have Undergone FGC



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Activists became aware of the extent of FGC and of their own experience as adults, introduced to extended accounts of the practice by family members

Drive to Activism

Talking about FGC is a **taboo** subject in the Bohra community

- Most activists were **not aware of the extent of the practice (or their own experience)** as children and young adults
- Even when activists were broadly aware of the practice, they **did not feel they could discuss** it in the community to learn more

First realization about the practice's prevalence came **later on in the activists' lives**

- **During or after their twenties** (e.g. after leaving home for further education)
- Most from an **interaction with family** introducing them to **women's accounts** (videos, films such as 'The Pinch of Skin')

Understanding the extent of FGC in the community led activists to **discover their own experience**

- Many activists requested **confirmation from their families** (mainly their mothers) as to whether the practice was performed on them
- Many found their family members **unwilling to discuss** the subject with them

*'This was an **unfortunate revelation**. I have no recollection of my cutting, so I was very angry.'*

*'Why would you **force that experience to your child?**'*

*'I almost didn't want to know because it was a shock to know. **It's against everything I believe about equality and empowerment.**'*

*'I realized that **what happened to me was absolutely wrong**. I was betrayed by my own family.'*



Anger

Confusion

Shock

Betrayal

Activists' emotional reaction to finding out about the extent of the practice in the community and their own experience is one of the primary reasons for their active involvement in the cause of spreading awareness

Most activists don't have clear memory of their own experience, but they are highly sensitive to the trauma other women have been through

Drive to Activism

There are many ways to remember a traumatic experience

- Different types of trauma memory are:
 - **Narrative** memory
 - **Partial** memory
 - **Body** memory
- Most activists are **not able to reconstruct a clear narrative** memory of their FGC
 - They partially come to remember it by **piecing together accounts** from family and other women
- An activist's body memory came with **nightmares and body pain**, triggered by other Bohra women's experiences
- It can be a **struggle for activists to come to terms** with their own experiences
 - The realization often comes as a **shock later on in life**
 - Many women feel **left out of the broader narrative** because of the highly variable types of memories
 - Many **also feel lucky** they cannot recall

'It is a bad memory that has passed.'

*'It was a **shock** when I was 7 and it affects you **when you are an adult.**'*

*'My experience **wasn't as traumatic** as my sister's, she went through a more intense psychological trauma. It's harder for her to talk about it. I **want to represent her voice too!**'*

*'I am shocked by the way that many **women remember it, all in the same way** (dingy apartment, old women, held down, razor/blade, powder, home, bled).'*

*'[My body memories] had a **large impact on my getting involved** with organizations.'*

Most activists shifted focus from their personal story to the story of others

- Although many activists **came to accept their own experiences**, they remained steadfast in their opposition to the practice
- Most activists believe the experience **hasn't had a lasting (emotional or physical) effect** on their life
 - They describe normal sexual function, the ability to orgasm, no psychological trauma
- Despite their own experience, activists are highly aware that **a lot of women do have traumatic experiences** with lasting repercussions
 - They are especially emotional about women in their own family, who were traumatized
- For that reason, activists choose to focus their **efforts on the need for awareness, communication, and action**

Activists are driven by their motivation to support the many other women who have been significantly affected by the experience, while they are also dealing with their own traumatic memories

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- **Family and Friends' Awareness of Activism**
- Current Outlets for Speaking Out & Challenges Faced
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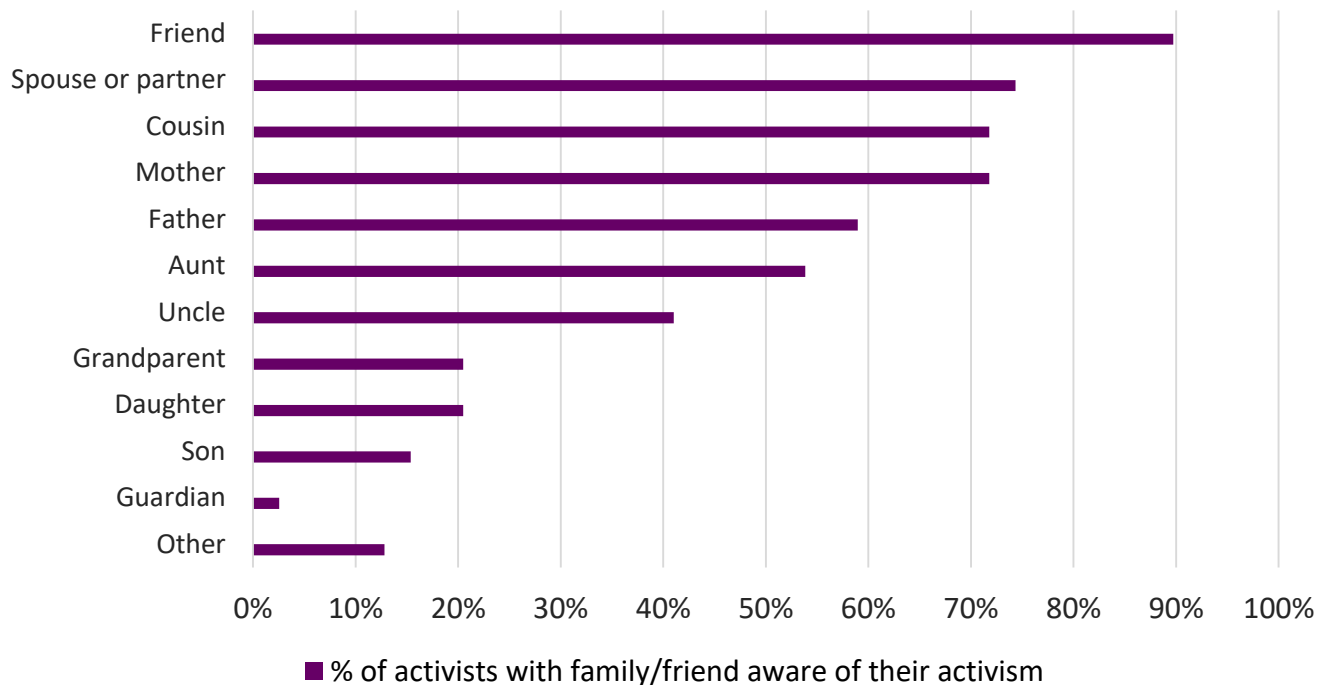
Nearly all activists have family and/or friends who are aware of their activism, with moderately high scores of perceived support from family/friends

Family/Friends Awareness

95%

of FGC activists have family and/or friends who are aware of their activist (n=41)

Family and Friends' Awareness of Activism



n = 39

Perceived Support (n=41)

0

66

100

Although there are generally high levels of support (66/100), there is still significant room for improvement

Activists report that their family and friends commonly feel a mix of pride and worry about their activism

Family/Friends Emotions



Family and Friends*

*I think **they worry that I could be harmed** if I speak out on such a taboo issue within the community but are also **happy and proud of me** to speak out on such an issue and share my personal experience.*

*Some are religious fanatics and **they feel when we speak about this we are ridiculing our syedna.***

*Some of my friends do not like the idea of me being so local about this practice. **According to them, I am wasting my time as nothing is going to change.** My family, however, is happy and proud and wants me to fight till this practice ends.*

*Because they are scared of what other people in the community think and are **afraid of Maula's power to destroy people who go up against him.** But **they are also proud** because they know how important this is (although they wish someone else would do it and not me!).*

66% of activists also have family members who participate in anti-FGC activism

Even when activists' family and friends support the activist, many activists still report that their family and friends fear there may be backlash or repercussions

*Size of word in thought bubble correlates with frequency of mention

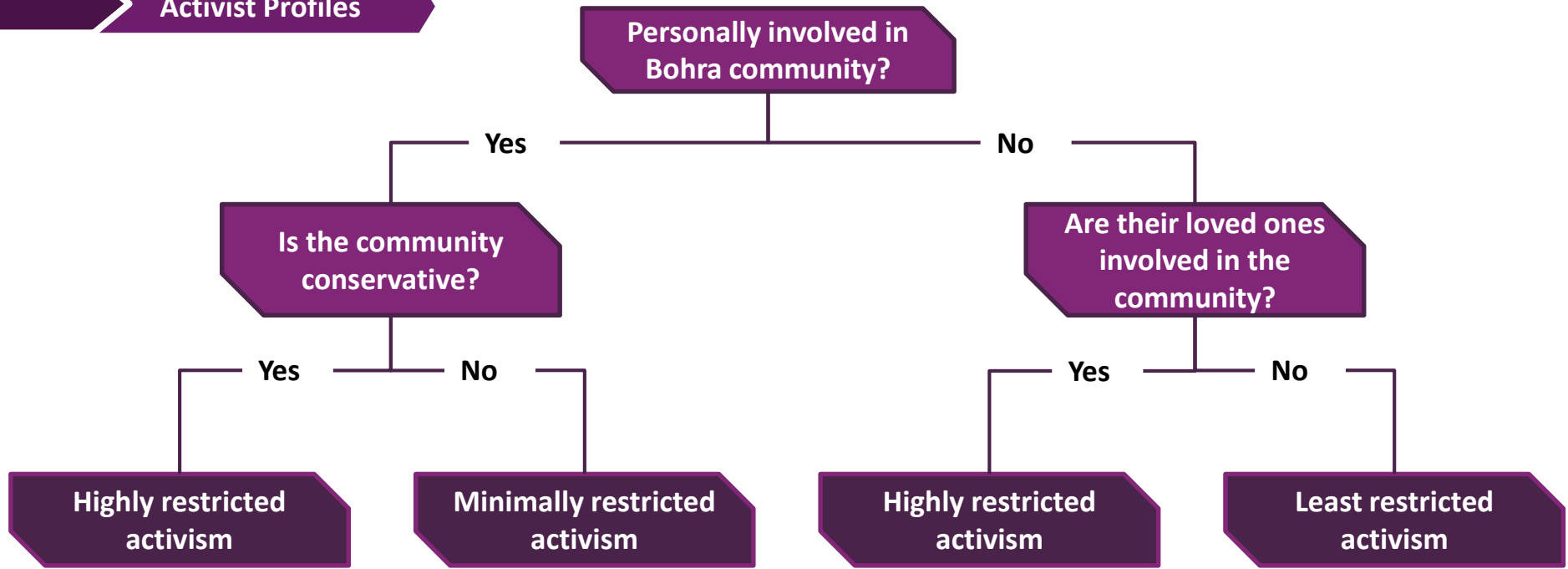
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Research underscored the importance of considering the degree and type of involvement of each activist and their loved ones in the Bohra Community

Activist Profiles



- **Limited social support** and/or ability to discuss the practice openly
- **Significant concern about social ostracization** of self/family/friends
- Desire to **maintain anonymity**

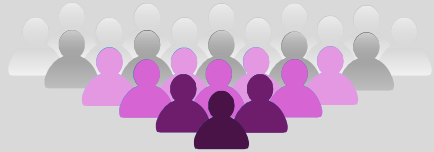
- **Moderate social support** stemming from more liberal community
- **Increased ability to open conversations** with other like-minded Bohras about the practice of FGC
- **Moderate concern about backlash** from more conservative Bohras

- **Variable social support** depending on interactions and relationship with loved ones still involved in Bohra community
- **Significant concern with speaking publicly** for fear of causing backlash against loved ones still in community

- **Moderate to high social support** stemming from lack of involvement in Bohra community
- **Minimal concern with speaking publicly** given lack of concern of backlash
- **Isolation from community creates barrier** to contacting Bohras and spreading awareness

Most activism takes place privately, focusing on close interactions with women from the Bohra community by sharing stories and resources

Outlets for Activism



- **Eponymous writing** (e.g. blogging, books)
- **Eponymous social media presence** (e.g. sharing articles on Twitter)
- **Interactions in media** (e.g. interviews, videos)

Considerations for Activists

- Public activism is more common among activists who (and whose family) have **moved out of the Bohra community**
 - There are **no fears of repercussions** from the community
- It is therefore regarded as a **minimally or least restricted** form of activism
 - It is possible to address **larger audiences** (e.g. public media)
- Private activists acknowledge **the need for and courage of public activists** who openly talk about the cause



- **Anonymous journalism**
- **Anonymous social media presence** (e.g. Twitter handler for an anti-FGC organization)
- **One-on-one conversations with women from the community** (e.g. live, via Skype)
- **Whatsapp groups** (women sharing stories)
- **Activist conglomerates** (e.g. organizing Twitter campaigns)
- **Additional support to organizations** (e.g. proof reading pamphlets and other campaign materials)

- Private activism is more common among activists who (or whose family) are **more actively involved** in the community
 - There are fears of repercussions to themselves, their immediate family, and their community at large (**socioeconomic boycott, legal persecution, religious disrespect, Islamophobia**)
- **Backlash** from public activism **can be draining and potentially threatening** to their status and involvement in the community
- Even though private activism can be seen as **highly restricted**, it nonetheless has a **large impact** on raising awareness
 - Many activists feel it is the **only way to harvest information** from members of a very close-knit community
 - Many activists reach out privately to other women, **empathizing with them and preventing defensive responses**

Public
Activism

Private
Activism

Concerns about the shame and social ostracization that they and/or their families will face are the primary barriers activists face against speaking out

Barriers to Speaking Out

Most Challenging



Challenges to Speaking Out

Fear that **culture of stigma and shame will cause ostracization** from the community

Concern that many family/friends have strong faith, and that **speaking out is seen as against the religious order**

Perception that the Bohra **community is unreceptive to activism, and unwilling to change** decreases motivation to speak out

Concern that **their activism will cause their family members to face repercussions** like social isolation

Conflicting beliefs with immediate family members may lead to **ostracization from immediate family**

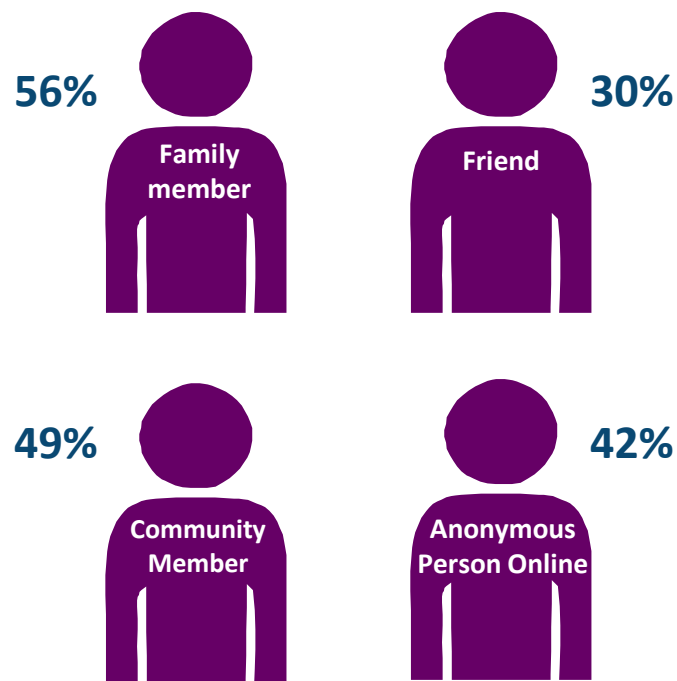
Feelings of **guilt that speaking out against FGC causes activists' parents to worry** about their wellbeing

Concern that drawing public attention to FGC in Muslim communities will **fuel pre-existing Islamophobia**

Conversations may trigger difficult memories and feelings, making FGC more difficult to discuss

Least Challenging

Percentage of activists who have had the following people react negatively to their activism



n = 43

89% of activists feel that coverage of FGC in the media significantly or slightly increases their motivation to speak out

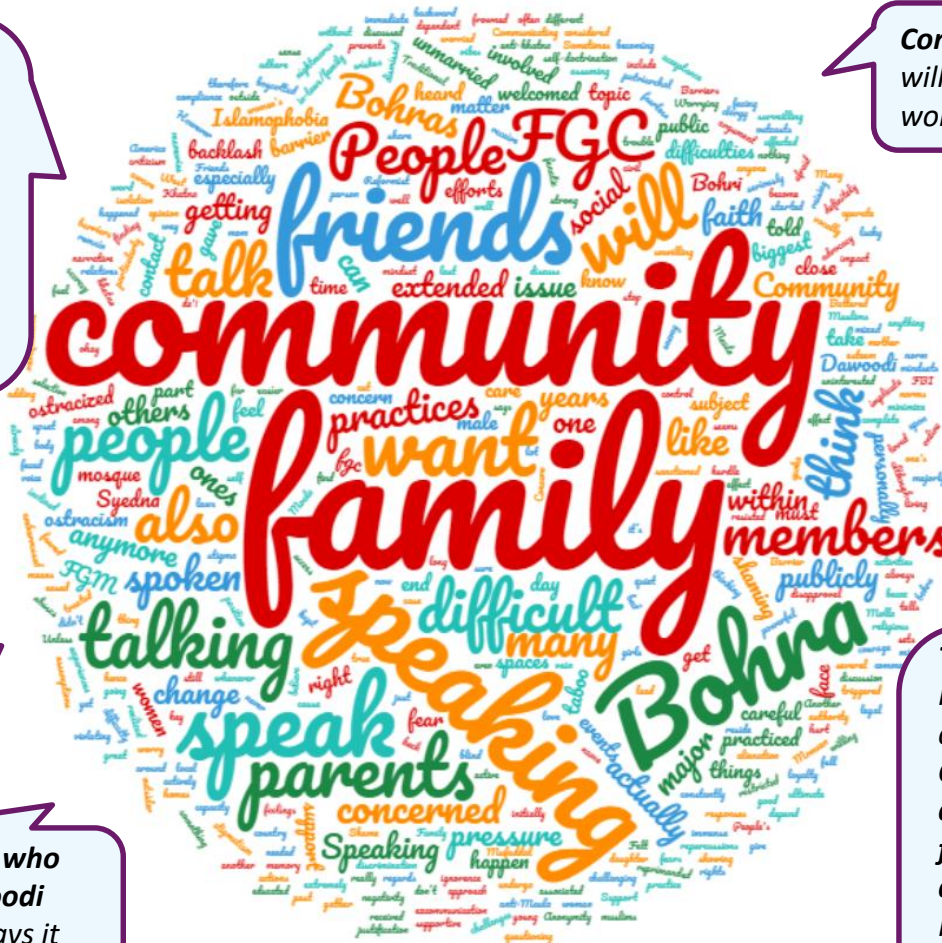
Themes of community ostracization, and repercussions on their family members consistently arise as primary barriers activists feel to speaking out

Barriers to Speaking Out

I didn't want to hurt my mother and feared there would be repercussions for her if I spoke out. I know that within the Bohra community, **speaking out on such a taboo matter such as FGC can end in isolation, excommunication, and well as one getting reprimanded.**

I am concerned about adding fuel to the Islamophobia in America by talking about "backward practices" like FGM. I am also concerned about legal ramifications against people in our community.

Traditional mindset of people who think it is sanctioned by Dawoodi Bohra faith. And that Moula says it must be practiced.



Community pressure. Speaking out will lead to major backlash from the women itself in the community.

I cannot speak out publicly *showing my face or voice* because **my parents and close family still believe in the practice.** As an unmarried, young Bohra woman, **they are afraid I will be ostracized and remain unmarried if I speak out.**

The biggest barrier is People. People are not willing to change, also **within the Bohra Community anything spoken against such practices is frowned upon and such people are considered outcasts.** Unless People don't change their mindsets even the educated ones, all advocacy is in vain.

Size of word in word cloud correlates with frequency of mention

Activists cite longstanding tradition and lack of awareness of long-term physical and psychological trauma as primary arguments for FGC

*'Some people have **trauma** the rest of their lives.'*

*'One day or one week of bleeding. But the same **fear and confusion** and the same idea they weren't supposed to talk about it.'*

*'When you are a **young girl of 7**, you have no sense about sexual activity, the girls haven't even got into puberty. They don't know what sex is or know about the anatomy. **It's actively wrong to a girl of that age.**'*

*'What irritates me is that **my mum should have explained to me** that we're doing this or given me an explanation. Not just give me a treat.'*

Against

Physical and psychological trauma (possibly lasting) ◀

Child sexual assault ◀

Lack of consent ◀

Unnecessary ◀

Irresponsible and uninformed decision ◀

*'If there are **no good reasons for it** [khatna] maybe we should back off.'*

For

▶ Long-standing tradition

▶ No apparent physical or psychological trauma

▶ Not as bad as other types of FGC

▶ Religious leadership deems it essential for religious practice

▶ Perceived benefits

*'According to some, **there are benefits** (e.g. lack of infections).'*

*'My mother, like other women, say **'that was the thing to do'**.*

*'Many people don't think they have been damaged, so they **don't think they would hurt their children.**'*

*'Because **'there are worse kinds'** of cutting, khatna is seen as less harmful.'*

'If he [the religious leader] says you have to do it, they [the community] will do it.'

Activists feel that many Bohras blindly follow the instruction of religious authorities, and therefore do not question the practice of FGC

Barriers to Speaking Out: Religious Leaders' Control

- Religious leaders are seen as **highly authoritative, respected members of the community** with a longstanding history of communicating and enforcing rules
- **Culture of submission and 'blind following'** causes many to follow the authorities' 'rules' without questioning, partially from respect, and partially from fear
- The **vagueness and lack of understanding of the religious justification stemming from religious texts** leads to increased reliance on religious leaders' interpretations and mandates



*'There's an assumption that **if the religious authorities condone it, then there must be a valid reason** – we shouldn't question it.'*

*'It's a huge cultural norm not to question the leader. **You just don't make waves.**'*

*'When you fight with religion, you can't win. People are **blindly following their religious leader**. If he says you have to do it, they will do it. There is no way of getting perspective. **If he said you should stop the practice everyone else would stop it.**'*

*'Because she spoke out, some people afterwards stopped talking to her and **her family and she had to publicly apologize to the religious leader**, otherwise her family would be boycotted. Then she got so scared and hasn't spoken out since.'*

Resulting Concern

The authority of the religious leaders causes many activists to fear publicly speaking out, and also decreases motivation for many who feel that their cause is a lost one without the support of religious leaders

A key barrier to speaking out against FGC is the lack of awareness of long-term health impacts, and perceived invalidation of its traumatic nature

Barriers to Speaking Out: Minimizing Impact of Khatna

Common Misconceptions

- Type I FGC has **no lasting physical or psychological damages** on an individual
- **Type II and III FGC are 'real' trauma**, and the conversation should be focused on those, rather than on a minor cut that happens in a small community
- **Some women don't encounter problems with their sexual function**, so they assume other women must not have sexual performance issues, either
- There are **no serious complications** from Type I FGC

'Some people don't think there are repercussions (physical or mental). I, for example, have a normal sex life (can orgasm etc). But I don't know the numbers [for everyone else].'

'To be very very honest, it doesn't make a lot of difference to the life of the woman.'

Resulting Impact

- Women with lasting physical and/or psychological trauma **risk feeling invalidated**, thinking that their trauma was not 'that bad'
- Bohra community members are **less likely to be receptive to ending the practice**, given that many believe it has no serious repercussions
- The **lack of resources and research available about the long-term health impact of Type I FGC** makes it more difficult for activists to open conversations with other Bohra community members

'Lots of people are fine. But unfortunately for a lot of people that [being fine] isn't the case.'

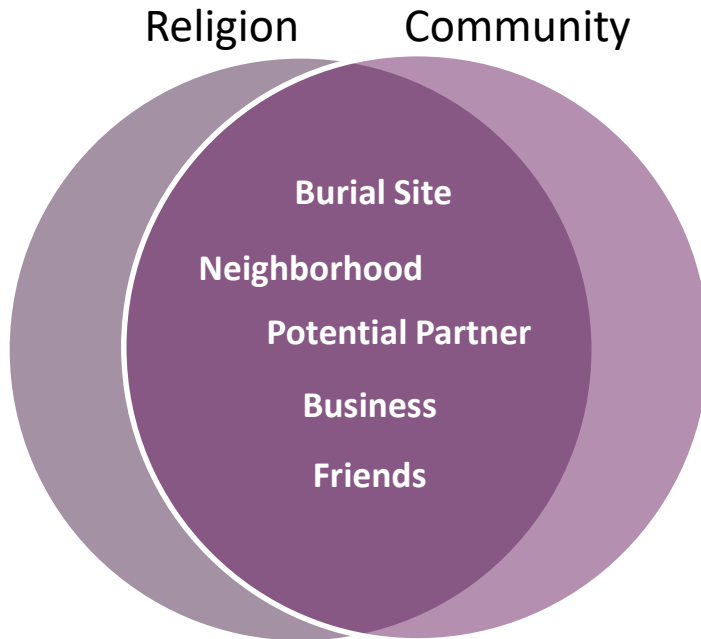
'Don't minimize anyone's experience. And be open about the more negative experiences and possible repercussions.'

Resulting Concern

Many activists feel that their activism does not resonate with the many women who have not experienced any lasting trauma, creating an additional barrier to expressing concerns about Type I FGC's health impacts

The high degree of overlap between religion and community leads to significant concerns about social ostracization when speaking out against FGC

Barriers to Speaking Out: Overlap of Religion & Community



- Nearly every activist highlighted the **overlap of religion and community** in the Bohra community, which has significant implications on their activism
- Particularly in more conservative communities, activists feel that **they cannot disassociate from the faith without disassociating from the community**, leading to a perceived 'no-win' situation: they either remain in the community, but face ostracization by speaking out, or leave the community and lose credibility and contact with members
- **Speaking out against FGC is often seen as an attack on the Bohra faith**, and therefore an attack on the community, which causes ostracization and potential retaliation
- The **closeness of the community also leads to a perceived lack of privacy**, and lack of ability to remain anonymous

'I worry about my mother because she's very highly respected in the community and I know there is a lot of discussion around me already and it's painful for her. I know the repercussions might not be as dramatic as in India, where e.g you might be accused of being treasonous (and have you house ransacked).'

'When she [my best friend] was 7 her mother didn't let her have khatna. They were not treated well because of that. They said she became promiscuous because she didn't get it. A lot of back talk happens.'

Resulting Concern

Activists who are still personally involved, or who have loved ones involved, in the Bohra community feel that they cannot speak out publicly as the repercussions may permeate into all aspects of their life

Activists often feel torn between a desire to end the practice, and a desire to maintain the wellbeing of their community and loved ones

Barriers to Speaking Out: Concerns of Repercussions on Community

Drive to Speak Out

Activists **feel compelled to speak out** against the practice of FGC in their community

*'It's something happening in our community and **we have to fight it and not have our daughters do something that happened to us.***

Respect for Bohra Community

While activists feel strongly against FGC, **many still feel a close connection to the Bohra community and faith**, and cite two primary concerns with speaking out publicly against FGC

Concerns for Bohra Community

1) Fueling Islamophobia

The prevalence of islamophobia, particularly in America, sparks a **concern that drawing attention to FGC in a Muslim community will fuel islamophobia** and potentially cause backlash

2) Legal Repercussions

Some activists highlighted a **lack of awareness about potential legal repercussions as a barrier to speaking out**, claiming that they would not want their family members to be punished for allowing FGC

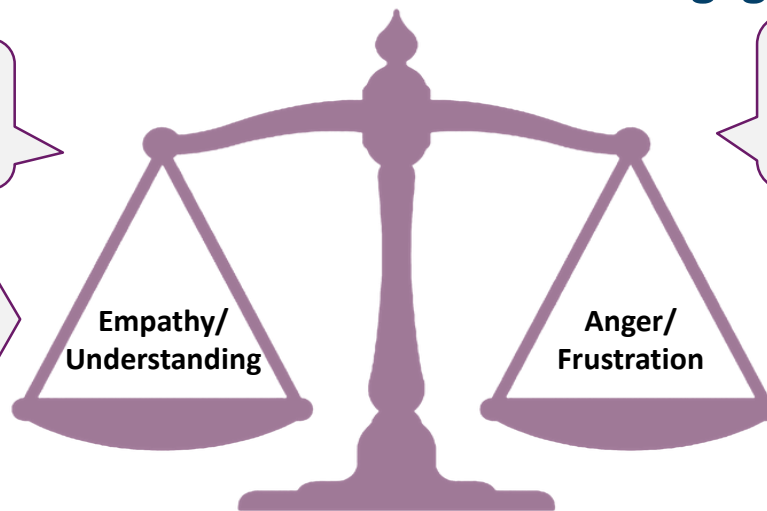
Resulting Concern

Some activists feel that in order to maintain the wellbeing of their community, they should not speak publicly about FGC—instead, they would prefer to work 'from inside the community' to drive change

Although remaining empathetic during conversations can be difficult, activists feel that it is critical to maintain effective engagement

'I'm a regular Bohra who wants to start a conversation, as opposed to presenting myself as an activist, part of an organization trying to raise awareness.'

*“Effective communication’ is going through the process of hearing somebody out and encouraging someone to tell you the story, as opposed to leading them with questions. **Not being judgmental.** My initial instinct is to say ‘how did you allow this to happen?’ **Rather than that you should really think about empathy, what prompted someone else to make a different decision’***



*'The most outspoken people are ones that have left the community, so when they say things (though it's brave), **people inside the community just don't listen to them.'***

*'A lot of people are out there shouting at each other, but they will not make a difference. How can we make it a better experience? My daughters will never think of doing it to their daughters. But **we need to educate them.** And that will take the biggest time and effort.'*

Maintaining a Balanced Dialogue

- Some activists feel that **striking the balance between empathy and frustration is difficult**—although they want to speak out against FGC, they recognize the longstanding traditional and religious factors driving the continued practice of FGC
- A few activists felt that **some prominent dialogue can be dichotomizing in focusing on frustration/confusion rather than on empathy and understanding**, and that it is important to present yourself as a member of the community who wants hear the other person out, rather than change them
- Although activists recognize that it can be difficult to maintain empathy in the face of confrontation, **they aim to be understanding in their conversations, and would appreciate workshops and/or resources** on how to disagree with a practice without disagreeing with a religion, and what specific approaches or language to use during their conversations with Bohras

Resulting Concern

Activists are concerned that without learning to approach each conversation with understanding and empathy, there will be continued backlash and dismissal of activism

Agenda

- Project Background
- Demographics & Ties to FGC
- Motivation to Become an Activist
- Impact of Activism on Family & Friends
- Current Outlets for Speaking Out & Challenges Faced
- **Current Resources and Hopes for the Future**



Activists describe that support groups, information, media coverage, and groups like Sahiyo have been particularly helpful in supporting them

Current Resources



The FGM cases in Australia, now USA, Sahiyo, speakout, news coverage, and the support of like-minded Bohra friends and some family.

Seeing others speak out has exposed me to different ways in which people talk about their experiences, which is very helpful.

The support of organizations such as Speak Out and Sahiyo as well as knowing there are other activists that have gone through the same experience and are speaking out as well.

Speak Out or FGM Whatsapp groups and Sahiyo's stories have given me strength to speak out. Having my cousin speak out years ago helped me as it was the first time I learned about khatna and learned that I was also cut.

Joining We speak out. Press coverage. International media coverage. Recognition and participation by activists on various national and international platforms

The guide on what FGC is, the different types, how prevalent it is in the world, the language we use to communicate about it, ALL of it has helped!

Summary: Barriers & Potential Resources

Concerns/Barriers

- There is **limited research available about the long-term health impacts of Type I FGC**, leading many people to minimize its repercussions and justify its continuation
- **Religious authorities have extensive control** over the Bohra community, and many people blindly follow their instruction and/or mandates
- **Religion and community are highly intertwined** in the Bohra faith, causing significant concerns with social ostracization that may result from speaking out
- Some **resources and/or videos can be dichotomizing** and cause backlash rather than curiosity
- Many activists still feel connected to the Bohra community, and are **concerned about fuelling Islamophobia or legal action against their loved ones**

Potential Resources

- **Conduct additional research** about the long-term health impacts of Type 1 FGC, or **make existing research more accessible** to activists to use as an aid in their conversations with community members
- **Consider working with the Bohra medical community to investigate the health impacts** and/or stress the importance of safe and sterile practices, without advocating for the practice
- Consider **providing resources outlining the religious justifications Bohra religious authorities use** to validate the practice, as well as any relevant counter-arguments that leverage religious texts
- Consider **facilitating more private forms of activism for individuals still involved in the Bohra community**, such as managing social media outlets or anonymous story-telling
- Consider **facilitating workshops or providing resources about tools for engaging in conversations** founded on empathy and understanding, including 'words to use' and 'words not to use'
- Consider **providing and spreading resources about the legal repercussions of sharing experiences** -- e.g., that no legal action can be taken against their loved ones
- Consider **facilitating workshops or 'how to's' for communicating with the media** while remaining sensitive towards the community



THANK YOU

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