

Post-event press release

FACES FOR CHANGE: SURVIVORS OF FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING IN INDIA

On June 15, 2019, Sahiyo launched its 'Faces For Change' photo campaign in Mumbai, India, in collaboration with Orchid Project, Global Health Strategies and Equality Now. The first such photo campaign in Asia, Faces For Change highlighted the practice of **Female Genital Cutting (FGC)** through portraits and personal stories of eight FGC survivors from the Dawoodi Bohra community in India. (Read more about what Female Genital Cutting is below).

The event on June 15, held at the Hindustani Prachar Sabha in Mumbai, featured an exhibition of portraits of the eight survivors, photographed by Dipak Nayak, a cinematographer from the Indian film industry. The exhibition was followed by two panel discussions: one with survivors and one with various stakeholders whose roles are vital for the future of the movement to end FGC in the Asian context.

At a time when the Indian Supreme Court is debating whether FGC falls within the ambit of the Constitutional right to religious freedom, Faces For Change tried to bring the public focus back where it belongs: to the **lives of women who have suffered because of FGC**, and whose trauma must not be trivialised.

In the **first panel discussion**, FGC survivor and general physician Dr. Eliza Kapadia said, "I decided to speak against this practice as soon as I started my [medical] practice and started taking cases of young girls who were emotionally damaged and scarred [by FGC]."

The panel also featured survivors Fakhera Merchant and Lubaina Rangwala, and was moderated by academician Qudsiya Contractor. "I decided to stand up and speak about FGC when my brother did it to his daughter. I was very angry, and I knew then that there has to be something done about this," said Fakhera Merchant.

All the survivors also pointed out that in the past few years, the public movement against FGC has helped to break the silence around this taboo topic. The younger generation, they said, is now more willing to listen to arguments against FGC.

The **second panel discussion** was moderated by researcher and former journalist Reetika Subramanian, and the speakers were: noted gynaecologist Dr. Nozer Sheriar, paediatric surgeon Dr. Kalpana Swaminathan, lawyer Divya Srinivasan and Sahiyo co-founder Aarefa Johari.

Divya Srinivasan pointed out that when the Supreme Court of India deferred the litigation asking for a ban on FGC to a five-judge Constitution bench in September 2018, it was a

setback for the movement to end FGC. “Once the case goes before the Constitution bench, the question is reframed – now the main issue before the court is whether banning FGC would be a violation of the right to religious freedom under the Constitution, whereas the original way in which the case was framed was that this practice is a human rights violation,” she said.

She also emphasised that having a law against FGC would mean going beyond simply criminalising the practice. “A law would look at education, spreading awareness in the community, providing medical or psychological support to survivors, and putting in place all these mechanisms. We need to think through these issues before going to the government and asking for a law, and make sure that the government has consultations with all these stakeholders before passing a law.”

Offering his medical view on the subject, **Dr Nozer Sheriar** said, “Anything damaging done to a woman or a girl is unacceptable by any medical standards.” He added that the Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India has come out with a very strong policy statement opposing FGC. “We have also said that we will not accept any medical person – gynaecologist, obstetrician or member of our federation to be involved with this practice. It is unethical, wrong, there is consent, no medical benefit with a lot of potential for medical harm.”

While defenders of FGC often claim that parents have a right to give consent on behalf of a child, paediatrician **Dr. Kalpana Swaminathan** said, “A child is a person. A child is not the property of a parent. Parents are guardians of a child, and yes, they are allowed to give consent for life-saving medical procedures, but this practice is not a surgery – it can never be called a surgery. It is mutilation.”

Speaking as an activist at the forefront of the anti-FGC movement in India, **Aarefa Johari** spoke about the need to see FGC from multiple perspectives – medical, legal, religious, cultural, human rights – and to engage with the community on all these fronts. “A lot of the conversations in the movement have taken place online or in metro cities. We need to take the movement more and more offline, to smaller towns and villages,” she said.

At the end of the event, **Insia Dariwala**, Sahiyo co-founder and creative executor of Faces For Change, called upon members of the public to [sign Sahiyo’s Change.org petition](https://www.sahiyo.org/petition) urging the United Nations, the governments of India and other Asian countries as well as other stakeholders to create laws and policies to help end the practice of FGC and ensure the safety of future generations of Indian girls.

What is Female Genital Cutting:

FGC, also known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), khafz or khatna/sunnath for girls, is an ancient cultural ritual that involves **cutting a part of a minor girl’s genitalia for non-medical reasons**. According to the United Nations, at least **200 million women and girls** have been subjected to FGC, but this figure mainly represents communities in Africa -- it does not

include FGC-practicing communities in Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore, Iran, the Maldives, and more.

In India, FGC is widely practiced among **Bohra Muslim** sects (including the Dawoodi Bohras, Alvi Bohras, Sulemanis and reformist Bohras), who cut girls at the age of six or seven. It is also practiced by some Sunni Muslim sects in parts of **Kerala**, where girls are cut in infancy.

According to the World Health Organisation's classification, these Indian communities typically practice 'Type 1 FGC', which involves **cutting a girl's clitoral hood and/or a portion of the clitoris**. Such non-medical cutting of healthy genitalia can lead to a variety of physical, psychological or sexual **health consequences**.

FGC is considered a **human rights violation** according to the United Nations, and it is illegal in several countries around the world. India does not currently have a law against FGC.

Faces For Change: Sahiyo and Partner Organisations

Sahiyo is a transnational organisation working to end Female Genital Cutting among the Dawoodi Bohra and other Asian communities through education, dialogue and community engagement.

Learn more about Sahiyo on its [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#) | [YouTube](#)

Orchid Project is a UK-based NGO that is catalysing the global movement to end female genital cutting (FGC) by pioneering with grassroots organisations around the world, sharing knowledge and best practices to accelerate change and advocating among governments and global leaders to ensure work to end FGC is prioritised.

Learn more about Orchid Project on its [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#) | [YouTube](#)

Equality Now is an international organisation that helps to advance the rights of women and girls by working to end harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation, child marriage, sex trafficking and sexual violence.

Learn more about Equality Now on its [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#) | [LinkedIn](#)

Global Health Strategies is an international organisation that uses advocacy, communications and policy analysis to advance issues and power campaigns that improve health and wellbeing around the world.

Learn more about GHS on its [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [YouTube](#)

