

**HEADLINE: FGM in India: A Memoir of a Movement**

**STRAP LINE:** How survivors and allies led an independent, bottom-up and bold movement against the practice of female genital mutilation in India

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With the din of applause still reverberating, Masooma stepped aside from the mic, away from the cameras and the glare of the lights, and took a seat in the audience. She steadied her breath, closed her eyes, and began to cry tears of pure relief and release. After days of memorising words she had spent hours crafting, she had gone up on a stage and orated the most vulnerable, difficult story she'd ever told, let alone performed in public. Her delivery was breathy and shaky, the words just tumbled without her volition out of her quivering

mouth. And now she was just glad she'd pushed herself to go through with it and that it was done.

Masooma Ranalvi was one of the many activists from parts of Asia and Africa who were attending a workshop on storytelling by the iconic media organisation, The Moth, as part of their Global Community Program. It was emotionally draining to spend days meditating on her own body and its traumatic experiences from her childhood as a way to introduce herself and her activism. Even more frustrating was having to articulate herself as an 'I' when, in fact, she was part of a much larger 'we' doing the work of raising awareness about female genital mutilation (FGM) in India. But for several reasons—social pressure, **need for** anonymity, fear of repercussion—she knew she was one of the very few who could afford to come out in the open and put a face to their work.

Since that day in 2016, Masooma has told versions of her story—replete with research, statistics, arguments, facts and anecdotes from many other survivors—to many other groups in many other rooms. She has had many difficult conversations in order to represent the work she and other Bohra women have been doing for the past decade in advocating against the practice of FGM that is deep-rooted in their community's patriarchal identity and cultural traditions. She has addressed groups of Bohra men and women at community meetings in Udaipur, presented before special committees of the World Health Organization aimed at ending FGM globally in Geneva, educated police officers in the Midland West, UK on the nature of FGM in diasporic communities, debated with conservatives from her own community on national television, engaged with wide-eyed women's studies students in cities across India, and handled press conferences in New Delhi teeming with reporters who had no idea what FGM was or who the Bohras were.



Female genital mutilation—the practice of cutting a female’s clitoral hood—is colloquially known as khatna or khafz within the small, close-knit minority Bohra community. The Dawoodi Bohras, ethnic Gujaratis, are a roughly million-strong group of Ismaili Shia Muslims who reside predominantly in the Western part of India and have a huge diasporic presence across the Middle East, Europe, North America, South East Asia, Africa and Australia, and are controlled by an elaborate hierarchy of priests.

In development sector circles, FGM has long been considered an ‘Africa’ problem. But thanks to the work of survivors, activists, NGOs and civil society organisations globally, there has been a steady recognition of the extent of the practice; ending FGM has been included as one of the United Nations’

Sustainable Development Goals. From Africa to Southeast Asia, FGM is known to be practised in 90 plus and counting countries, amongst various communities of Muslims, Jews, Christians, etc.

In India, however, the prevalence of the practice among the highly educated minority community of the Bohras is unique, clandestine and (officially) unrecognised by the state, although research suggests that it is also practised among some Sunni Muslim communities in India. The Indian state claims to have no official data about the prevalence of the practice, and there is currently no law that explicitly defines or bans it.

The practice has medieval roots and is perpetuated under the guise of ‘curbing’ women’s sexual desires or maintaining ‘sexual purity’. Colloquially, khatna is referred to as a practice required to cut off a young girl’s ‘haraam ni boti’, which translates to ‘sinful lump of flesh’. Not only is it a practice that is patriarchal and invasive, but research shows that khatna can negatively impact women’s sexual lives and can cause psychological damage in the form of fear, anxiety, shame, anger, depression, trauma and trust issues.

It is believed that about 75% of Bohra women have undergone khatna. India has also reportedly become a destination for ‘vacation cutting’ for Bohra girls, as strict law enforcement makes it increasingly difficult to perform the practice in the West. Today, this extremely secretive practice finds increasingly contemporary justifications of purity, medicalisation, cultural significance, and identity. The Bohra practice of khatna is ordained and supported by the decrees of the community’s current religious leader, called the Syedna.

Although the Quran<sup>1</sup> does not prescribe the practice for women and girls, the Syedna’s support and sanction of khatna is enough for the community to deem it a necessary practice, usually conducted and perpetuated by the community’s women: mothers or grandmothers take their daughters to traditional cutters or doctors in the community hospital. It’s always women—foot soldiers of the patriarchy—being made to perform the roles of both oppressor and the oppressed on loop.

For the past decade, Masooma and many other women, both survivors and allies, have been at the forefront of the Indian anti-FGM movement, a unique

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<sup>1</sup> While there is no mention of khatna in the Quran, there are several hadiths which get quoted to support this practice. Bohras also refer to a text titled *Daim-ul-Islam*, a principal source of Isma'ili Shia jurisprudence for Bohras, which mentions khafz.

effort that is personal, political, complex, intersectional and constantly evolving in its articulation. It can also be described as an independent, bottom-up and bold movement.

In my eyes, it can be looked at in many ways—a socio-religious-cultural or community-centric effort, a feminist movement, a fight for sexual and bodily integrity, a humanitarian movement, a local chapter of a global mandate, or a case study of what modern activism can look like in a digital age.

NGOs don't build movements; people do. As we will see in the stories that follow, it is the survivors, those who are most affected and vulnerable, who have become the activists working towards direct action and change, and who continue to carry the mantle of questioning and eradicating the practice.

My own connection and entry point to this movement, my mother Masooma, didn't become an activist overnight. All of the impetus behind her work has been years in the making. It began when she was seven, just like other survivors in her group. Dressed up by her mother in her finest and promised a special outing with her doting grandmother to buy a scoop of ice cream, she ended up being taken to an old, dilapidated house in Mumbai's Bhendi Bazaar, a predominantly Bohra neighbourhood. In a dark, bare room, she was subjected to a terrifying cut in her private parts. Even after the shock wore off, she never mentioned that afternoon to a soul—not her mother, nor her father, not even her two sisters, with whom she usually shared everything. She had no understanding of what had occurred, certainly not why—just that something painful had been done to her genitals, and those parts were 'shameful' to speak about openly.

As a Bohra woman, I have witnessed the passing down of FGM through generations of women in my family. My mother and both my aunts were cut without their consent, and my grandmother and the women before them suffered the same fate too. This cycle of communally sanctioned intergenerational violence in my own family, however, was broken with me—I was not subjected to FGM or the trauma that ensues, and have therefore been afforded a life of bodily autonomy and a right to sexual pleasure.

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## Section 1: The Reckoning



What is an incomplete clitoris? What does it mean for one's relationship to pleasure, their own body and sex with another? As a khatna survivor, Aarefa Johari found herself contemplating these questions deeply. "Is it the reason I rarely feel the need to masturbate? Would it mean a lifetime of less pleasurable sex compared to women with full, normal clitorises? How much less, and how would I ever know?" she wrote in an [article](#) titled 'Have you met your clitoris?' in 2016.

These are not, however, questions that arose for her as a teen when her mother first discussed her khatna with her. Upon coming across an article on FGM that discussed the practice in Africa but also included an anonymous Bohra's survivor's account, her mother openly conferred with her daughter, expressing shock at how the practice had been such a traumatic experience for someone else. Consultations with friends and family threw different rationales her way. Some of it was framed as preventative—that khatna was believed to keep diseases, certain types of cancers, or UTIs at bay, all claims with no medical basis. Some of it was racist—what happens in Africa is brutal; the way Bohras practise khatna, on the other hand, is sterilised, less severe, and therefore more 'civilised' (Bohras are known to practise Type 1 FGM, as opposed to the even more severe Types 2 and 3 as defined by the World Health Organization.). Her mother, a former healthcare professional who had worked at a pathology lab for years, was a discerning, educated woman who was always trying to find a scientific perspective, even in religion. Once she succumbed to persuasion, Aarefa followed suit.

Adult Aarefa became a feminist who questioned patriarchy, her belief in religion, and viewed the memory of her khatna in a new light. "When I started to think more deeply about human anatomy and I understood what was cut and the role of the clitoris, I was like what the hell. What does this even mean for my sexual life?"

Enraged, indignant and helpless all at once, she ultimately understood that her mother was unable to act differently because she was conditioned by society and their community. "When organised religion and patriarchy come together, it's a really powerful force, and you're just a cog in the wheel." Her tenuous relationship with anger shifted; from believing that anger merely alienates to sensing how anger could drive her to some sort of action. "I don't think revolutions have come without enough people being angry about some form of injustice. It is a very legitimate thing to be angry."

She did what she could to use her voice; she wrote blog posts and news articles. She'd email her writing to everyone she knew, prodding them to engage in conversations with her. As a then-young journalist who covered communities as her beat, Aarefa started to run into conflict-of-interest issues in reporting on the issue herself. But she did everything she could to create a

buzz about it in her newsroom, giving other reporters tips and giving quotes to other publications whenever her editor allowed it.

She recognised the fear that other survivors might harbour in speaking out, given a lifetime of shame and intimidation. Despite being camera-shy and not particularly keen on putting herself or her story out there, she lent her voice to the chorus, given the dire need to have credible, non-anonymous Bohra voices speaking out. She knew building traction was imperative.

Turning to activism would become a way for her to regulate her emotions and reconcile with the fact that she couldn't undo what was done to her, but that she could at least do her bit to stop it from happening to other young girls.

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Raised in a home that questioned religion, Farzana hadn't grown up traditionally Bohra. Her family's history could be traced from Mumbai to Zambia to Ontario, while she had spent her entire life in Canada. Apart from a few extended relatives, the oasis of the small Indian community in her predominantly white neighbourhood was intrinsically multicultural, diluting any distinctive Bohra-ness she could assume.

Joining the queer Muslim community 'Salam Canada' allowed her to embrace her Muslim identity, but she still wasn't sure what 'being Bohra' meant or entailed. Unlike the community at large, she wasn't steeped in the daily prayer or rituals, and certainly not the orthodoxy, of the Bohras. On two separate occasions, however, she heard of khatna from cousin sisters. Farzana remembers listening to her relatives empathetically. She trained to be a warm, careful listener as a part-time social worker with her own private psychotherapy practice. But at the time, she also assumed the women were opening up to her because she was queer, and therefore they felt somehow more comfortable talking to her about a 'taboo' memory. Only some years later, in 2015, when she read a searing first-person account of the practice in an article, was she moved by how scarring and prevalent the practice was and how difficult it would have been to verbalise such a private experience. Farzana found herself looking up the contact details of a woman she had never heard of. She sent the author of the article a brief thank-you message on Facebook. Eleven hours later, she got a reply from Masooma: "Thank you for

reading it, Farzana. We are trying to do something here in India. If you are on WhatsApp, you may want to join our group, Speak Out on FGM. Please share your mobile number. And I can add you.”

Overnight, Farzana was plunged into a whirlwind of emotional, passionate conversations among women who were cross-sharing testimonies and experiences of their khatna, thousands of miles away from her. They were strangers she had nothing in common with, most from India, some from parts of North America and the UK. There was no specific logic for why she was drawn to the cause. She had no personal experiences to share and had never been part of anything Bohra feminist before—the first time she’d met another queer person from the community was a Bohra man when she was 31. Yet she felt a kindred connection with these women. She sensed that what was brewing was important and worth being a part of.

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Samina (*name changed*) can vividly recount the first time a few members of the WhatsApp group met in person at the Horniman Circle Starbucks in Mumbai. After a round of coffee orders were placed, all the women sized each other up guardedly, trying to gauge how traditional the other was, calculating what was safe or appropriate to say out loud.

The ice broke eventually, and the energy, enthusiasm and vulnerability of their online camaraderie soon began to emerge in real life. Having open and critical conversations with other Bohra women felt starkly different from an outsider pointing out flaws in the community, such as the time she first heard of khatna as a concerning issue from her professor in college. Her reaction had been defensive and protective, even though at the time she didn’t actually have a clue about the actual reason behind the practice. But here, in this group of women, everyone belonged. They were all insiders with a genuine desire to stop the intergenerational cycle of violence.

Outspoken by nature, Samina remembers blurting out during this first meeting that khatna was only one of the outdated, unjust issues facing women in the community. She unconditionally loves her community and was raised with the belief that Bohras are the best, better than anyone else—an echo of the model minority complex that has been etched into the psyche of all Bohras. But as

she grew older, she realised there was never any honest critique or open conversation about their struggles or shortcomings, no stories shared about the Reformists<sup>2</sup>, or discussions about community taxes, diktats or dogmatic control of the clergy. Amidst this rosily progressive picture, certain regressive moments stood out starkly to her—the same community that once saw women like her grandmother visit the mosque in sleeveless sari blouses was now advising women to avoid banking or accounting jobs and stick to designing ridas (a two-piece dress akin to a hijab traditionally worn by Bohra women) and topis (men’s caps).

Bohra women have been historically viewed as more empowered, educated and economically independent compared to other Indian women, including other Muslim women. Yet, in the community, the moral values of modesty and sexual control are considered the sole responsibility of women, and gender-based traditional discriminatory practices such as Iddat continue to exist. As Samina observed, even though many Bohra women were educated and held positions of influence as doctors and lawyers, they were now strongly advised to take up professions that fit neatly into the gender stereotypes of the time. There were many other instances and incidents that weighed heavy on Samina’s mind—from the viral video that featured the Syedna asking a teenager if she knew how to make chapatis in her misaq<sup>3</sup>, the publicly acrimonious legal battle between the current Syedna and his uncle over the titleship of ‘Syedna’ that had divided the community, to the ugly rumours that were spread about Masooma on the community’s WhatsApp networks when she started speaking out against khatna.

Sitting around these women and being able to openly speak her mind on these issues felt like a freedom Samina didn’t know she could afford. These women were well-read, well-spoken, driven towards change and not afraid of the pushback they were sure to receive for daring to challenge an age-old tradition. “I cannot explain how empowering meeting those other women was

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<sup>2</sup> For several years, a number of Bohras have been speaking out against the corruption and oppressive practices of Syedna Burhanuddin, also accusing him of levying a number of taxes on the community and various other un-Islamic practices. The Bohra reformist struggle was launched in Udaipur in the 1970s, and today has spread to different parts of the world where Bohras live. [https://www.dawoodi-bohras.com/news/838/97/On-the-Dawoodi-Bohra-Reformist-Struggle-Interview-with-Abid-Adeeb/d.pdb\\_detail\\_article/](https://www.dawoodi-bohras.com/news/838/97/On-the-Dawoodi-Bohra-Reformist-Struggle-Interview-with-Abid-Adeeb/d.pdb_detail_article/)

<sup>3</sup> Misaq is a ceremony in which an oath of allegiance to the chief priest or Dai ul Mutlaq is given.

because, for the first time, I didn't feel like I was the rebel child alone. There were just so many rebel children.”

Samina had always felt like a misfit, driving around the neighbourhood sans rida, working a busy office job with late hours, with priorities and ambitions very different from the women she saw around her every day. Meeting these survivor-turned-activists shattered any biases she may have held, expanding her sense of what a Bohra woman could look and sound like, and reaffirming her own unconventional Bohra-ness.

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Fifteen years after Masooma was taken by her grandmother into the dilapidated room, she encountered the term ‘female genital mutilation’ in an article about the damaging ‘rite of passage’ practised on young girls in rural Africa. The context should have seemed foreign and abstract at best to a young woman growing up a continent away in the bustling metropolis of Mumbai. Yet, the description of the practice stirred something within her. As soon as her mind began connecting the dots, she resolutely shoved aside the thought. It was easier to be in denial than to admit that she was perhaps ‘sexually damaged’. And worse, that her very own family had not just condoned, but enabled, it.

At this point, Masooma, a bright college student dabbling in social work and feminist writing, was shaping up to be an activist in her own right. After years of bearing witness to accounts of social boycott and physical violence against Bohra Reformists who sought accountability over community funds levied through religious taxes, she, like her father, Shoaib Ranalvi, became an active member of the group that sought reform within their community. This seemed like a natural thing to do—to seek accountability from the leadership of their community. But raising questions in a highly conformist environment came at a cost. Her family, amongst many other Reformists, was excommunicated<sup>4</sup>—her father was publicly pronounced a ‘kafir’ (traitor), community members barred from having any social or financial ties with their family and relatives relegated

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<sup>4</sup> The ability of the Bohra community leader to excommunicate its members for challenging his authority is a matter being debated in the Supreme Court of India.

<https://www.scoobserver.in/cases/excommunication-of-members-from-dawoodi-bohra-community/>

to meeting them only in secret. The ‘shunning’ was humiliating, emotionally draining and damaging to their lives and livelihoods, yet they were aware they were not the worst affected. Masooma had heard other stories of businesses being ransacked, homes vandalised, and men and even women being physically assaulted.



As painful as it was, the family started to build a new life in Bandra, a more cosmopolitan suburb of Mumbai, some distance from the community’s stronghold in Nagpada. They remained Bohra in the way they cooked, ate, prayed, conducted their lives and adhered to their values. Masooma’s mother remained a devout Bohra who still wore traditional orna and ghagra every day and made the family observe all important days in the Islamic calendar—from Moharram to Lailatul Qudr or Jaagwani Raat. She made sure that Masooma and her sisters read the Quran, said their namaz and observed roza. You’d still find a thaal, a lota, a chakri and a satrangi in their house—objects and rituals in

the household were still essentially Bohra. Excommunication had not erased their Bohra identity, but it had shattered their sense of belonging. Masooma's father, now disenchanted with religion and the community's dogmatic ways, played his part by raising Masooma and her sisters to be independent thinkers; they attended the convent school in the neighbourhood, mingled with students of all faiths, and grew up to enjoy many more freedoms than their Bohra cousins and relatives, including the ability to eventually marry non-Muslims.

Masooma, then a married adult woman with a daughter, confronted khatna again in 2011, when a petition to end the practice in the Bohra community surfaced. Started by a woman named Tasleem, it hadn't gained that many signatures, but a spurt of media coverage on the issue ensued. Journalist friends who knew Masooma was Bohra began reaching out in the hope that she might have a quote to contribute. Around the same time, Priya Goswami, a film student at the National Institute of Design, began making a documentary called *Pinch of Skin*<sup>5</sup>, interviewing Masooma and many other Bohra women. In her anonymous byte for Goswami's documentary, Masooma, just a black silhouette with expressive hand gestures, sombrely recounted the complete lack of knowledge or explanation surrounding her traumatic childhood experience and how horrific and invasive it now felt. The seeds of India's anti-FGM movement had started to slowly sprout. For Masooma, all of this triggered the question: *Why have you been silent all this while?*

The intensely personal and secret experience that Masooma had neatly compartmentalised in her archive of memories had suddenly started to unfurl, making her confront all the political strands of patriarchy, culture, tradition and sexuality that were tied to it.

Around this time, I was beginning my own journey to understand the legacy of the practice my mother had been subjected to. It started with my naively picking up a copy of *The Vagina Monologues* in my college library. I spent the next few weeks reading, researching and thinking a lot about vaginas, about pleasure, and also about control and violence and, upon some further reading, symbolic rituals such as female genital mutilation. A hasty Google search

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<sup>5</sup> A *Pinch of Skin* became a widely acclaimed and screened film, which won a Special Mention at the 60th National Film Awards of India. Goswami went on to co-found one of India's main anti-FGM organisations, Sahiyo. She also created 'Mumkin', an AI-driven app aimed at enabling users to have difficult conversations about gender-based violence, consent, good touch/bad touch and LBTQI concerns, as also FGM.

taught me it was a 'rite of passage' practised on young girls in rural Africa. Only upon sharing some of this reading I was doing for an assignment with my mother over a casual conversation did I learn this was also a practice in my own community and family. She told me about the pain, about her memories, about the fear she remembered vividly—but not a word about her own sexual life or pleasure. I didn't dare ask any more.

I moved on to scour the internet, seek conversations with family members and acquaintances, and try to find out more about what women believed were the rationales behind the practice, and my mother did the same. One woman described the procedure as just a small snip of flesh cut with a regular store-bought blade; another described it as the removal of the clitoris performed under anaesthesia at a private clinic. Intellectually, some Bohra women acknowledged that the rationale for FGM fails to withstand scrutiny, yet they continued to embrace it as a fundamental aspect of their faith. FGM is often motivated by beliefs about what is considered 'proper' sexual behaviour, linking procedures to premarital virginity and marital fidelity. They believe it reduces a woman's libido and helps prevent 'illicit' sexual acts. For Bohras, a community traditionally comprising traders, this could have been a way to keep women 'in check' while their men travelled for work.

These conversations and explorations with my mother had the effect of bringing to the surface something that had been stirring deep within her for a while. The ex-communication of my grandfather and of their family unit had allowed her to grow up without conventional diktats in a home where she could choose how 'Bohra' she could be. This resulted in a sort of dilution of the extremes of the community, percolating to my mother, who protected me from the practice. But now, she dwelled on the thought that her more conservative cousins, who she grew up with in close quarters, would have probably subjected their daughters to the practice. The nagging silence around it all and the absolute lack of room to openly question any of it started to eat away at her.

"I was angry. But I wasn't angry at anybody in particular. I was not angry with my mother. I was not angry with my grandmother. I knew their actions came from a space of ignorance, not harm. But I was angry with my community. I started to wonder, what kind of religious sect are we that do this to our own daughters?"

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Choosing to cut one's daughter is not an individual choice; it is coloured by pressure from elders in one's family, community members, neighbours, friends and religious acquaintances, all of whom may start enquiring about a young mother's khatna plans as a daughter approaches the age of seven. Traditional cutters, whose livelihood is vested in cutting young girls, are often members of one's close-knit community. Amid this sort of pressure, Samina's grandmother decided to take matters into her own hands and arrange for a cutter, leaving her mother no say in the matter.

Despite being angry and resentful towards her mother years later, as an adult, Samina understood that she had suffered from a lack of awareness and choice. She also understood that social acceptance was a particularly thorny subject for her family. When she was about 12 years old, her father had stood up against an injustice within their joint family, and the repercussions were severe. They were pushed out of a 1,400-square-foot, three-bedroom house in a swanky gated community that belonged to Samina's grandfather in an expensive part of Mumbai and into a poky one-room flat in a Bohra ghetto. The overnight change in their economic class led to a rapid decline in their social life as well—there were no more colony friends, next-door relatives, mosque visits or jiazats<sup>6</sup>. They missed out on most daily conversations and connections with other Bohras and found themselves deeply isolated. "Despite all of this, because my father stood up for something, he became a very strong idol for us."

Detached from the community, Samina saw this period as a time when her family, which could earlier easily be described as highly compliant, started thinking more rationally and developing ideas independently. Even the religious teachings they followed became more humanity-based. She feels the incident took their blinders off, readying them for situations where the truth may at times be uncomfortable, such as questioning whether her khatna was really the harmless symbolic ritual people said it was or whether the rationale behind it was more insidious. When Samina began actively seeking out answers about khatna from those around her, most responses were either 'it's

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<sup>6</sup> The custom of inviting the Syedna home to bless the family and business.

not a big deal', or that it was a practice performed to *enhance*, not curtail, sexual pleasure.

"I knew something was amiss. Do you mean that the hundreds of millions of uncut girls are incapable of experiencing sexual pleasure? The explanation just didn't fit. And then the memories started coming back. When you have bad memories, you really hide them very, very deep down."

Samina needed answers; she needed to know the real reason behind why she had undergone so much pain as a child and some way to reconcile all the resentment and anger she was carrying.

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Masooma, detached and living far away from her extended Bohra family in Noida, a suburb of Delhi, felt a sense of isolation from the community—one that had shunned her father even in death by denying him a burial in the community cremation grounds.

It also led to a strange urgency to share her story. This desire was born out of honouring an internal compass based on values her father had brought her up with. The guilt of ignoring this compass felt immense, coupled with doubts around what her lone voice could amount to. But she knew that breaking the cycle in her own family wasn't enough.

In 2015, Masooma's [article](#), titled "I was Circumcised When I Was a Girl of 7", became a flashpoint for the anti-FGM movement, the seeds of which had begun sprouting across the globe. It was published on a widely read digital platform of a national TV news channel, NDTV. The article went viral and the floodgates opened with a #MeToo-like chorus of Bohra women from across India, US, UK, Canada and, reaching out to Masooma over Facebook, WhatsApp and email, with messages of how her story was nearly identical to theirs and thanking her for speaking out.

The response felt therapeutic and overwhelming at once; her sense of anger and frustration mirrored theirs, and with the relief came the window to sustain the conversation that had been repressed for so long. She decided to start a small WhatsApp group consisting of her sisters and a few Bohra friends to keep the conversation going. In a week, the group had multiplied to 50 or more women. A psychologist from Pune, a writer from Canada, a software engineer

from North America, a counsellor from Nagpur, a teacher from Udaipur, a doctor from Ratlam, a student from Delhi, a housewife from Surat, and many more.

The women, mostly strangers to each other but united in their common experience of khatna, began going back in time and sharing their experiences. Some had vivid memories; for some, it was a blur; some had no memory at all and only found out about it after confronting their mothers. Some mothers expressed regret and some daughters expressed anger and betrayal. The conversation turned to their sexual experiences, with discussions about pain and lack of orgasms, and psychologists and counsellors chimed in and talked about PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and childhood trauma's effect on sexual drive. Some women said they hadn't experienced any problems but admitted that they didn't know what 'normal' sex was pre-khatna—they collectively felt robbed of their right to sexual pleasure and bodily autonomy. To Masooma, waking up to a barrage of candid messages on her phone from Bohra women about their experiences around khatna, especially their openness about their sex lives, felt like the first stirrings of what could become a revolution. This motley crew of women unpacked their own experiences and found resonance in each other's anger and trauma; they resolved to end the practice for the next generation.

There was no sense of what this meant or how it was going to be achieved, only raw determination. These women were aware that they were a drop in the ocean, but they were resolute in wanting to cause some significant ripples.

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Farzana jolted awake and turned over to check the time on her phone—it was 7.30 AM. She peeled herself out of her comforter to grab her notebook and pen from her desk, made a quick cup of coffee, and promptly got back into bed. Yet another fully formed scene had popped up in her head that she needed to quickly jot down before it dissipated. This time, it was about a woman, now a recurring character in her mind, who was sitting down at a dining table with a beloved aunt to have a fraught conversation about a sensitive matter.

Although a novelist with three books under her belt, this wasn't her usual morning writing routine that involved sitting at her desk building upon ideas and plotlines, brick by brick, day after day. These fully formed vignettes that consistently flashed in her mind at the break of each day were distinctly different—were they the seeds of a new story or her psyche fictionalising episodes from her own life? The scenes had begun to appear a few months into her joining Masooma's WhatsApp group, where she found an unexpected tribe of Bohra feminists but also unwittingly entered a period of emotional chaos that would leave her profoundly changed.

There was no clear logic for why Farzana was drawn to the cause. In the beginning, she was just an observer, chiming in whenever she felt it was necessary. As she stayed on in the group as an ally, she felt fairly certain she had no memories of having undergone khatna. She had learned from other survivors that the traumatic effects of khatna often resulted in repressed memories in some survivors. But since her mother had passed away when Farzana was very young, there was no one she could even check with to confirm or deny her own truth.



Slowly, the scenes began to pop up. Then came the body memories. And then the nightmares. In one flash of memory, she found herself standing at the entrance of a relative's apartment, getting ready to go somewhere while feeling utterly confused. Suddenly, she was sensing pain during sex—pain that had never existed before. She was anxiously waking up from nightmares where she felt physically pinned down by something. “When I look back at that time, my nervous system was so overstimulated. On the one hand, these scenes were there. On the other hand, I was waking up in a different time zone to dozens of WhatsApp messages in this group, absorbing their stories. At that stage, there was no strategising or anything. Everyone was just sharing. It was just raw. And then, there were my own memories.” She searched for a therapist for months, but had no luck finding anyone who had real knowledge

or experience with FGM in particular, even though anti-oppression therapists were starting to become common in Canada at the time.

After Farzana had about twenty kernels of 'scenes' scribbled in her notebook, she transcribed them onto her computer with no sense of whether **they** would lead to a book or not. A narrative arc was emerging: a woman coming to consciousness about khatna and then having to figure out where she stood in relation to the issue. Farzana ultimately decided to trust in her creative process, confident that she had a nuanced narrative to put forth about a journey of self-discovery and personal reckoning, latent trauma, familial discord and support, and a story in which there were no real villains, least of all women.

*Seven*, published in 2020, is a beautiful novel that traverses the plains of truth versus memory and customs versus kinship. It follows its protagonist Sharifa, a Bohra woman from New York, who at first navigates a sense of inertia towards engaging with activism around ending khatna that was brewing within a small section of her community back in India. The book oscillates between the present—confronting pressure to cut her own seven-year-old girl—and the past—unfurling the legacy behind the practice across generations in her own family.

Joining the movement, and subsequently writing the novel was an intense period for Farzana personally, politically and creatively. Most of all, she was thankful that, as a psychotherapist, she had the tools to work through it, and as a novelist, she had an outlet to express what she was going through.

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## **Section 2: Stirring the pot**

As an outcome of speaking out against khatna, Aarefa began serendipitously encountering a diverse set of women who had already been speaking out, in their own ways, against the practice of khatna. A small yet diverse group, consisting of social worker Shaheeda Tavawala, researcher Kirtane, filmmakers Insia Dariwala and Priya Goswami, and herself a journalist, established Sahiyo as a collective, emphasising education and community engagement concerning female genital cutting. Before this, Aarefa could only think of trying to draw some traction to the cause on an individual level. Banding together with these other women, she felt emboldened to do more ambitious things.

Now that she was building her own platform alongside her collaborators, she was able to bring a great sense of depth and tact to how to frame the discourse around khatna. The media had played an important role in that initial realisation for most survivors, and Sahiyo recognised it would remain an important channel for them to build their campaign. As a journalist, Aarefa, in collaboration with filmmaker colleagues like Priya, utilised her training,

connections and experience to raise awareness and sensitivity about reporting on a delicate topic. She spent time in newsrooms, conducted national and international media sensitisation workshops, and collaborated with her colleagues to create a guidebook for the media, which outlined appropriate language, imagery and reportage for writing about the practice.

Forming Sahiyo also meant Aarefa had taken on a huge role, with immense responsibility. She had never co-founded anything before, and now there was a steep learning curve before all five of them—how to register and run an organisation, process paperwork, set up rules and guiding principles, and manage people. In 2015, Sahiyo's members also joined Masooma's WhatsApp group, and both sets of women were often in dialogue about how to build campaigns and amplify their collective effort. At this time, the global news cycle prominently featured khatna among Bohras, coinciding with Australia's first female genital mutilation trial.

The case eventually led to the sentencing of a former midwife, a mother of two girls, and a Bohra community leader for cutting two young girls, leading to a crisis of fear within the community. While the activists debated the ethics of criminalising the practice and holding the mother accountable, almost 20 anjumans<sup>7</sup> in the US, Canada and Australia issued statements to their congregations to comply with their local country laws that explicitly prohibited FGM. These developments had a cascade effect of creating wariness and even paranoia within the community.

Despite everything, her activism never resulted in Aarefa and her family being targeted. In 2012, when Aarefa had just started questioning the practice in her immediate circles, she recalls receiving an angry phone call from an elderly aunt who informed her that girls who are not cut become prostitutes. But Aarefa remained fearless, assured of the support she felt from her immediate family.

As the movement took form and picked up momentum, she began to see up close the backlash that was cropping up around her. Such as community members who were allegedly made to apologise to the Bohra administration for speaking against the practice, or the young girl whose decision to speak out

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<sup>7</sup> An anjuman is the local community of Bohras set up in different regions to manage and oversee the religious and secular functions of the members of the community wherever they may be located.

in the media led to a relative facing the threat of being boycotted by a community-run institution.

Aarefa developed a thick skin to online trolling, being branded anti-community in Bohra WhatsApp circles, and rumours that the activists were paying women handsomely for fabricating khatna stories. As her work gained traction, there was an increasing sense within the community that it was wrong to try to disturb the status quo and wash the community's dirty linen in public. In one instance, one of her great-uncles got extremely angry with her, and the ripple effect included some extended family members not showing up for her grandmother's funeral proceedings. This not only affected Aarefa, but also deeply upset her mother, who had not always seen eye to eye with Aarefa on the issue but nonetheless supported her activism.

Against the backdrop of the insensitive media coverage that had made the Bohra community feel attacked, Aarefa saw that it was easy for the anti-FGM activism to be misconstrued by the community, for whom khatna was intrinsically linked with identity and a way of life. She experienced pressure to adopt an activist mindset, requiring careful consideration before taking any action. Sahiyo started to deliberate more about their approach, the language they employed in their work, and how they could, rather than provoke people, encourage them to express themselves and feel heard.

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Masooma, along with her colleagues from the organisation she co-founded with early members of her WhatsApp group called WeSpeakOut, and Aarefa's group Sahiyo, worked tirelessly to supplant FGM in mainstream discourse on human and sexual rights, in India and globally. Conversations within the community involved questioning, debating, engaging, listening and sharing stories in an attempt to understand rationales and opinions on continuing the practice. Masooma knew that reversing a practice that was so deeply entrenched in ideas of the community's traditions, despite having no religious basis, would require waging a long ideological battle.

"Intuitively, one thing I realised was that the perpetuation of a practice like FGM was planned. It just did not 'just happen'. There was a strategy involved. There was clear thinking. There was an ideology. It was based on a philosophy.

And so if we had to counter it, we would also have to have a clear plan, a clear strategy, a clear ideology and a clear counter-narrative. And that is something that we had to devise and something that we had to find.”

A few major things plagued them—first, the staggering silence within the community about the practice. Masooma’s childhood and adulthood saw no open discussion or mention of the practice, not even within the household. Second, questioning the status quo was inherently at odds with how Bohras lived and organised themselves—Masooma knew this well through her time as a Reformist and had also started to reflect on how even the Reformists had not wanted to touch women’s issues of reform. Third, there was a dearth of reliable data on FGM<sup>8</sup>.

One of the first things the group did was write a letter to the Syedna. “We naively thought if we wrote a letter to him, he would listen to us. He will call us for a meeting. We will discuss it. Obviously, that did not happen. We didn’t get a response to that letter at all, ever. On the contrary, there was pushback.” Outreach to community members merely through their personal networks had its limits, so they turned to a tool that was fast gaining traction in India at the time—a Change.org online petition. It became a way for them to register their position and voice in the public domain. The petition, which went on to eventually gather more than two lakh signatures, also became an entry point into continuing conversations within the community and gaining media coverage. Such petitions traditionally need one face, a single story—and that became Masooma’s. But she insisted that it be only a signpost to the common experience of many others and got as many of her group members to undersign the petition as were willing.

The petition also turned out to be a significant moment in Masooma’s own journey as an activist. Masooma recalls that Change.org’s India director at the time, Preeti Herman, was starting to see that beyond running a tech platform, there was potential to work with diverse women in particular as agents of change. Masooma became one of those women when she joined the initial ‘She Creates Change’ cohort, a leadership program specifically for women. This

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<sup>8</sup> In an effort to address a critical gap in knowledge about the nature and scope of the practice in the community, WeSpeakOut in partnership with Nari Samata Manch commissioned a qualitative data study titled ‘The Clitoral Hood, A Contested Site’ in 2018.

new community she joined had a diverse range of voices, which included campaigns advocating for a maternity leave bill, opposing forced C-sections by doctors, to more local civic urban issues. She learned the power and art of campaigning, which became her starting point for understanding how to navigate the development sector and the world of global advocacy. Gradually, Masooma honed her skills as a modern activist in the internet era, broadening her perspectives on how to launch a campaign, cultivate awareness about the complex and delicate issue of FGM, identify stakeholders and approach potential allies.

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Educational initiatives and direct community engagement has always been critical to Sahiyo's vision and Aarefa's work. This has included everything from collecting survivor accounts and stories of positive change from men and women who decided not to cut their daughters in the form of a blog, media literacy webinars, collaborating with WeSpeakOut on campaigns like the ['Each One, Reach One'](#) initiative, to spearheading video and photo campaigns featuring survivors, allies and community members who had vowed to end the practice in their generation.

But much before they formed Sahiyo, Aarefa, Insiya and Priya had considered the possibility of filing a public interest lawsuit against ending khatna. They had started conversations with a lawyer and begun preparations. Around this time, they encountered the book *However Long the Night*, a story about the work of Molly Melching, activist and founder of the anti-FGM advocacy group Tostan in Senegal. The book delves into Melching's reflections on how the anti-FGM law in Senegal, which arrived before the community was ready, backfired, leading to the community rebelling against the law and advocating for the cutting of many more girls. This made Aarefa and her colleagues double down on the idea of building education within the community before pushing for legal recourse.

"The idea is that you need to build a critical mass of dissent within the community before a law can truly be effective. Therefore, we decided against the PIL."

Ironically, a lawyer from New Delhi named Sunita Tiwari, who had no ties to the community or the issue, did file a PIL against the practice of FGM in the Supreme Court in 2017. Only when newspapers reported on this petition did Aarefa and other survivor-activists become aware of it. They were horrified by some of the statements and generalisations in the petition. The activists were concerned that their side of the story and their campaign against their own cultural tradition would go unheard once the Supreme Court admitted the case.

“We were afraid the petition had jeopardised all of the work that we had been doing because we knew that the community was not yet ready for a law, especially without a nuanced approach to the issue. At Sahiyo, we had chosen not to get into the legal aspects of things, and we didn’t. But for community-based campaigners, there was no choice left.”

Aarefa, however, was relieved to hear that Masooma had become an intervening petitioner<sup>9</sup> in the case. Despite not having the financial resources, time or bandwidth to jump into the legal battle with their backs against the wall, WeSpeakOut filed an intervention petition in order to register the voice of survivors.

Soon, a pro-khatna lobby within the community also filed an intervention to the petition, arguing that khatna was a religious practice and the courts didn’t have the right to interfere. Almost immediately, an organisation called Dawoodi Bohra Women for Religious Freedom (DBWRF) emerged, dedicated solely to the defence of the practice.

With the buzz around the PIL, there have been multiple attempts by the media to reach out to the Bohra community leadership for an official response to questions about their stance on the practice. Aarefa predicted what the consequences of this might have been: internal communication warning informal cutters as well as doctors practising khatna to become discreet about their ‘cutting camps’, and to stay silent when asked about the practice by non-Bohras.

This prompted Sahiyo to redouble its in-person community outreach initiatives, one of the most successful of which was the ‘Thaal Pe Charcha’

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<sup>9</sup> According to the activists, they felt a real threat of the issue being co-opted by a majoritarian agenda, in much the way the Triple Talaq case and law were eventually worn as badges of being “saviours of Muslims” by the Hindu Right.

series. Conceptualised by Insia Dariwala, the idea was to engage with the community through a universally loved and uncontroversial topic—food. Bohras are particularly proud of their culinary traditions, especially the eight-seater thaal meals that can feature anything between seven and 12 courses of lip-smacking sweet and savoury dishes. Sahiyo’s meet-ups, by organising the traditional communal meals, aimed to facilitate conversations among women of all age groups about issues that impacted their lives, such as FGM or khatna.



Aarefa also viewed it as a platform to discuss specific ongoing issues and implications of khatna. “There was a botched khatna case in Gujarat, so Insia and I went there to speak with the family and even the cutter. It was so

horrible and so sad to just see how traumatised that child was after that incident.” She recalls having quite a few discussions about that during Thal Pe Charcha events, where they’d have breakout groups and discuss ways to best respond as a community.

With over 17 editions held over three years in Mumbai, Pune, New York and California, Thaal Pe Charcha facilitated feminist discussions about social and gender norms, film screenings, conversations with other activists, hosting many regulars, some of whom initiated their own chapters.

The meet-ups became a safe holding space to have intimate conversations; they also helped Aarefa and her colleagues better understand the nuances of the practice. Conversations with women from older generations, who made the decision to not cut their daughters but remained silent out of fear of retaliation, particularly moved her.

The pandemic eventually caused things to fizzle out (albeit after a few online editions), but engaging with the community face to face was a huge success in Aarefa’s eyes. It was reaffirming to see that even though people couldn’t publicly support the movement, there were still many who’d come to share their appreciation for the work or their decisions to not carry on the practice with their own daughters. Despite much of these instances being anecdotal, they pointed to a real impact and a slow shift that was occurring for many.

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Samina faced a dilemma in 2022. She had been given a significant opportunity to boost the movement, but it also carried the risk of her potentially revealing her identity. As part of the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which happens once every four years, WeSpeakOut was one of a select few civil society groups that had the opportunity to lobby before member states as part of their peer review of human rights offences. Samina was part of a team that submitted a stakeholder report on FGM in India to the United Nations. An ally human rights organisation, Equality Now, provided last-minute funding to send a representative for the pre-UPR sessions, where NGOs and CSOs would meet with various ambassadors and member states to inform them about human rights offences. However, the question was, “Who could

go?” Masooma had already gone once, and no one else was available at such short notice.

The group turned to Samina, who knew the report intimately and had started to slowly step into more of a leadership role over the past year. She was well aware of the urgency of educating the international community about the prevalence of the practice in India in order to pressure the Indian government to take a stand.

She reflected on how, since the day she joined the movement, she had been all in. The silent support of her parents was a big motivator. But her mother, who had passed away a few years earlier, had remained afraid for Samina’s safety through it all, fearful of how vindictive forces in their community could be if she were to be openly associated with a cause that was being hailed as anti-community. Samina had always recognised the Bohras as a peaceful lot, partly due to their reputation as a business community that has consistently maintained amicable relations with political power. But she and her family had heard enough rumours about families who were socially ostracised and reformist leaders, like Asghar Ali Engineer, who were physically assaulted. For a family that lived in the heart of a Bohra neighbourhood, the consequences could range from verbal and physical abuse, harassment, not being able to rent out a home in the area, to threats to her siblings’ jobs and education. Her way of reconciling with these stakes was to choose to remain anonymous: “I just don't know if the fight is more important than my family.”

Whether or not to go for the UPR review was a difficult decision—Samina contemplated what having a survivor and voice from the community representing the issue would mean, as well as the media attention that could come along with it. At this juncture, the movement in India had already explored every avenue to make their voices heard, achieving some success but also encountering numerous setbacks and plateaus. Despite years of painstakingly protecting her identity, ultimately Samina decided that going to Geneva was indeed worth the risk.

Over the month that followed, she was terrified. She prepared for her trip, worked to familiarise herself with the complexities of the UPR lobbying process and delegated all her household responsibilities to siblings and relatives. In August 2022, the then-31-year-old made her way to the UN headquarters—her first trip abroad since she visited her aunt in Saudi Arabia as a little girl. She

carried the heavy burden of finally scoring a recommendation for India on FGM.

“My biggest fear was not being able to live up to everyone’s expectations. Especially the expectations of my fellow survivors.” She felt like a rookie among veteran Indian activists with 20-plus years of experience who were representing other causes—it was intimidating, to say the least. Samina remembers crying on her very first night in Geneva. She had arrived in a foreign country, eaten dinner alone by herself and was incredibly nervous about speaking publicly at the UPR pre-sessions.

“It's very difficult to be an anti-FGM activist. Revisiting the incident repeatedly is traumatic. The whole UPR process, emailing and coordinating with other UN members for a meeting, presenting before a hundred delegates—no matter how many times you do it. It does not stop affecting you. You don’t really become immune to its effect on your being or your personal life.”

Over the next four days, Samina made a formal presentation before UN member states, sought individual meetings with different country missions and personally met with delegates from over 25 UN missions to talk about the movement. She was disappointed at how the reception was largely one of shock and surprise: “We’ve been screaming our lungs out about FGM for more than seven years, and people are still surprised that it happens in India.” While she wrestled with the difficult position of being a victim and having to share her story repeatedly, she also received a lot of interest, empathy and understanding from many quarters.

Three months later, on 10 November, 2022, at the 41st Session of the Universal Periodic Review, among other countries, India’s human rights record was examined by the UN Human Rights Council’s UPR Working Group. Samina and her colleagues watched the proceedings virtually. Most countries had finished reading out their recommendations and Samina had still not heard any mention of FGM in India. She shut her laptop screen, crestfallen that their effort had gone in vain. But nearly at the end of the process, Costa Rica made a recommendation to India to enact a law against FGM and develop a national plan to eliminate the practice. This signified that a United Nations’ member state had officially urged India to take action against FGM. Samina felt a rush of relief, excitement, pride and hope all at once.

“In that moment, it felt like all it takes is one small country in the world to tell the world’s largest democracy to officially take care of their FGM problem. That was really important. And I’m so glad that I could be a part of that.” She felt affirmed that her trip, which had ultimately brought renewed energy to the movement, had borne fruit in more ways than one. It was in that hallowed, intimidating setting at the United Nations, continents away from home, that Samina found herself fully capable of addressing and overcoming being a victim.

“Accepting that I am part of a vulnerable class before a room full of very important people helped me accept what happened to me while also empowering me to continue doing what I am doing. It makes you vulnerable, but it also liberates you, like there’s nothing more to be ashamed of anymore—that shame is gone.”

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As vocal as Bohra survivors of FGM have been about the intricacies of their community’s socio-cultural and political dynamics, talking openly and publicly about sex is difficult.

In being able to embed the question of sex in fiction, Farzana was able to create a more accessible entry point for Bohra women to think about their bodies and experiences. Similar to how varied the memory of one’s khatna itself can be, its impact on sexual life can be plotted across a wide spectrum. Some women experience excruciating pain, some enjoy sex like any other, while some may be unable to achieve orgasms, or have a truly embodied sense of sexuality because of the trauma stored in their bodies.

Farzana’s novels have often delved into themes of sexuality and taboos, but her own lived experience and explorations of mindfulness during sex, done while she was in therapy during the period of working on her book, made for important additions to *Seven*.

“Within a queer community, there’s a lot of openness to talk about sexuality—there’s a way that people talk about boundaries in a way that is just different. So I already had the facility to talk about those kinds of things. And when I was doing my trauma work, I had to come to terms with the fact that, for instance, I would often dissociate through sex—in a sense, exit from my body. I thought,

maybe if I could talk about things like this, it would help people to start talking to their therapists about it.”

Farzana’s novel captures an unwavering love and fondness of the community. “I remember that I am part of a larger ummah, a faith, a clan. Despite its shortcomings, I still want to belong,” says her protagonist Sharifa in one scene, wrestling with the fact that apart from all the food, rituals and peculiarities, khatna is also part of the community’s history. “Generation after generation...following the same, terrible, unwritten script” of little girls losing their bodily autonomy and right to sexual pleasure. Farzana’s critique of the orthodoxy and politics of the Bohra community is also clear, with many references in the book to the Bohri Jamaat as the ‘Bohra Big Brother’, or the Syedna’s family as ‘The Royals’. One section sheds light on social boycott as a deterrent for survivors in speaking up or organising: “Stories of ex-communication, shunning, and all the violence that ensues are cautionary tales spread to guide the flock away from apostasy. And yet, in these shared stories, there is often an undercurrent of admiration and hushed applause for the doomed protagonists. But most Bohras will never join the protestors; they want peace for their own families.”

Apart from just writing a good story, Farzana eventually saw the book as potentially being a useful contribution to the movement. From features in national newspapers in Canada and countless podcasts, book reviews and author features, *Seven* has served as an important tool for advocacy and a vehicle for education. Farzana was able to take the story and the work of her fellow activists into many new worlds, garnering wide interest in circles far beyond those typically knowledgeable about issues like FGM or gender-based violence. In addition to building discourse and awareness through reports, fact-finding investigations, community consultations and articles, Farzana believes that reading a story about the issue could allow for a different type of empathy.

“There’s no guarantee how people are going to read that story. They could still read it with Islamophobia in their heads. However, I believe that individuals are more likely to comprehend the subtleties when they immerse themselves in a novel.”

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Samina and her colleagues' travels and research efforts from the past year, especially engaging with young Bohra women in the 14–18 age group, have made her sense a shift in the narrative about the practice on the ground. The rationales of sexual illicitness and promiscuity are no longer in the foreground; khatna is now purely about 'religious purity'. Samina has seen up close the robustness of the Bohra clergy's PR machinery, and she's unsurprised, claiming that ever since the matter went to the Supreme Court, the community administration has worked in overdrive to control its image. "We are not taught to question anything, we are just taught to comply. I'm unable to talk to my own neighbours about anything, as people don't want to talk at all without *raza* (permission). They simply state that they have received instructions not to discuss khatna."

This has made Samina increasingly feel the need to speak to a wider section of the community, namely through accessible media that can show both sides of the debate and show that the movement is for the Bohras by the Bohras. Not knowing how long the bandwidth of her and her colleagues working on the cause voluntarily will last, she wants to now focus on creating dialogue that can potentially be shared, disseminated, consumed widely, reach the last mile of the community and take on a life of its own.

An independently commissioned study from 2018 found that Bohras from metropolitan cities like Mumbai enjoyed relatively more anonymity and less surveillance, allowing them to avoid performing khatna and remain unnoticed, in addition to economic and social mobility. But in smaller towns, the community is more tight-knit, making it harder to choose otherwise. Some 79% of respondents in medium cities and small towns had subjected their daughters to khatna, compared to 50% of parents in big cities.

This underlined Samina's drive to work on a project that could serve as a storytelling and educational tool across smaller towns and villages such as Siddhpur, Dahod, Godhra, Kapadvanj and Khambhat, where Bohras have historically clustered.

Despite never having herself worked with the medium before, she worked on a Gujarati-language [short film project](#) that explores the debate around the issue of FGM through the entry point of a married couple debating the pros and

cons of getting their young daughter cut. On one hand, there are considerations of cultural tradition, connotations of identity and belonging, and blind faith in the advice of elders. On the other hand, there is all the 'noise' being made by activists, news of the Supreme Court petition and overall research that shows there are no medical benefits of FGM, as well as news of incidents such as the little girl from Gujarat who had an incredibly botched khatna that led to excessive bleeding and a series of medical mishaps. It was important for her that the film portray a conventionally observant Bohra family and steer away from any overdramatisation. Most importantly, the goal was to not portray women as perpetrators who were solely responsible for carrying out the practice.

Samina hopes crafting such pieces of educational content (that can be disseminated widely through platforms such as WhatsApp) can serve as a provocation to deliberate on the practice.



### **Section 3: A few steps backward, to move forward**

As an anti-FGM activist, Farzana has always consciously chosen to make contributions to movements that are more behind the scenes, preferring not to have her face or her own personal story out in public. This included managing WeSpeakOut's social media handles, activating their online presence, posting daily to build traction on campaigns and collaboration with other stakeholders, spreading awareness and establishing urgency around the cause. It also involved being the first line of defence against trolls to field vitriol and widespread misinformation, such as unverified claims that khatna had medical benefits and would enhance sexual pleasure. Farzana had not anticipated the amount of backlash that would come with the job, and she had to quickly find ways to counter propaganda with myth-busting efforts. She was especially rankled when fellow Bohras gaslighted survivors.

"I remember being kind of flummoxed at the beginning. When they would say things like, 'You're not really Bohra, so you can't speak on this'. It would make me think—well, one could argue that that's sort of true for me. I am from this community. This is my ancestry. But it's true, I don't live in one of those Bohri apartment building complexes. I don't have one of those Bohra smart ID cards. I'm not on the inside. I can barely speak Gujarati." It was during these times that leaning on other members of the group for emotional support, or load-sharing, became especially important.

Working closely with her Bohra colleagues allowed Farzana's journey as an anti-FGM activist to start by examining how power and patriarchy operate in the most private and intimate spaces in her life. Her interest then moved towards zooming out and seeing the larger picture of gender-based violence and how women's and non-binary people's bodies have been controlled historically. *Seven's* warm reception had kicked off a much-needed mainstream conversation about FGM in Canada, far beyond the Bohra community, and Farzana began to feel the need to do things in her immediate environment. This led to her joining other activists and organisers to start the End FGM Canada Network, with the intention of building an umbrella initiative that could bring together the handful of disparate anti-FGM initiatives across the country. As a founder and member of its steering committee, she was closely involved in its inception and growth right from the beginning. But as the only founder who was a survivor, she sometimes had to step into the role of

speaking in public, being on panels, and sharing her own story of FGM. This felt necessary at the time, but alongside her two jobs and ongoing therapy, it was emotionally and mentally exhausting.



Stepping away from being a core member of both WeSpeakOut and End FGM Canada did, however, lead to some important self-knowledge. She had learned she wasn't inclined to lead campaigns, influence governments, or regularly meet with committees and working groups. She began deeply thinking a lot about what kind of activist she wanted to be, what kind of activism she might actually enjoy. In 2019, she approached Sahiyo US Founder Maria Taher with an idea: "I had written an advice column ages ago on a different issue. It didn't

go anywhere. But then I thought, you know, this is something that I could help with. I'm a writer. I'm a psychotherapist. This is something that comes quite naturally to me. Maybe this can be my activism, just like writing the novel was my kind of activism." She began [\*Dear Maasi\*](#), an online advice column on how FGM/khatna affects "bodies, minds, sexualities, and relationships". Questions have ranged from: "How do I tell my husband I haven't enjoyed sex for 15 years?" to "I'm a transgender man who is also a survivor of female genital cutting" to "Dear Maasi: Will my daughter ever forgive me?" With queries pouring in in both English and Gujarati, Farzana's empathetic and expert responses began creating an online repository of FAQs about the body, sexual trauma, shame, pain and rationales behind the practice.

Farzana eventually grappled with her own question: "How much FGM does anyone want in their life?" She has stepped back from serving on any active steering committees or core groups of organisations. However, she does find value in activities such as assisting survivor groups interested in becoming advocates or creating modules for mental health workers. She takes a yearly lecture at a Canadian university where a professor uses her book as class material, writes the occasional 'Dear Maasi' column, and always gets involved in a variety of events every year on February 6, termed 'Zero Tolerance to FGM Day'. These intermittent, but intentional, contributions have become ways for her to draw boundaries, balance her role as a survivor and an activist, and explore a path that energises rather than depletes her.

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An award-winning reporter, community organiser, storyteller, writer, and violinist with the Bombay Chamber Orchestra, the multi-hyphenate Aarefa attributes herself as just being one of those people who can't help but have multiple passions. But balancing it all eventually caught up with her. "I thought I was winging it. But after the burnout, I can tell you that I was not managing; I was pretending to manage. I think I was somewhat delusional. You get used to ignoring the emotional impact this work has on you; a lot of times, even the things I've been reporting on have been very disturbing. And there's a need to destress or recover from it. You also don't want to become somebody who gets desensitised."

In retrospect, Aarefa admits that years of working almost 24x7 would indeed lead her to eventually shut down at some point. When the pandemic hit and she, like many others, was stretched too thin, a long, deliberate break to recuperate became a necessity. She is now slowly returning to work in full swing while learning for the first time how to take care of her mind and body.



But she doesn't regret any of it: "The movement needed momentum at the time." Opening up dialogue with other FGM activists from around the world in this regard has been comforting for her in a sense. Seeing how people around the world, despite the vastly different context and cultures, are also all struggling to manage in similar ways has been humbling.

“Not everyone can make activism their full-time career, and not every organisation has that kind of funding. But it’s inspiring to see that people are still able to do so much despite so many difficulties.”

Despite all the constraints and Sahiyo’s India chapter struggling to sustain itself due to FCRA restrictions, Aarefa is still proud of what’s been achieved over the past decade. She’s particularly proud of her Sahiyo US colleague Mariya Taher for taking forward the American chapter and making it flourish, organising regular activist retreats to nurture a new generation of activists, organising a range of diverse training events, commissioning research reports and even starting a new platform called ‘Bhaiyo’ that focuses on men as stakeholders in the FGM conversation.

At the end of the day, she feels like the success has been in creating a space of healing for survivors and activists alike to look after each other as women do. Sahiyo, which literally means friend, has been all about a collective of female friendships, and Aarefa feels she has come into her own with this movement.

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Masooma’s nearly decade-long journey as an anti-FGM activist has been all-consuming, tiring and entirely voluntary, with no financial gain but huge personal costs to her bandwidth in running her business and household and single-handedly supporting her family. But it has also been full of learning and doing.

As an anti-FGM activist, advocacy for Masooma has meant knocking at the doors of any political or administrative leader she could get access to—even if it meant only getting an email address or face time with secretaries. Advocacy has meant months of cold-calling publications and reporters, building ties with the English, Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi press, appearing in videos, writing articles, penning opinion pieces and authoring open letters. Advocacy has meant continuing to try and speak with more and more community members, be it cousins, childhood neighbours, distant acquaintances, organising closed-door meetings, workshops or travelling to different cities. Advocacy has meant representing India’s voice on a global stage to dispel the idea that FGM is an ‘Africa problem’. Advocacy has included approaching the National Commission for Women, the National Human Rights Commission of India, the Ministry of

Women and Child Development, and so on. And finally, advocacy for Masooma has also meant getting reacquainted with other streams of activism, be it India's larger feminist movement or groups and efforts advocating for religious freedom.

"As minorities, while we are facing flak and patriarchal pressures within our own community, outside of it, we are facing pressures as a minority from a right-wing government. You realise naturally that there are many other causes where you need to stand up and speak out."

Despite her exhaustion and the long road ahead, she takes solace in the fact that she and her colleagues have played a part in outing the practice. "It's now an issue in the public domain. There's research about it, material to read, stories to hear, it's never going to go back into a closet—and generations to come will always know about it."

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It has been difficult for me to fully grasp the viscerality of the trauma Bohra survivors have endured, as I never experienced khatna. But I have had the privilege to see up close the grit and tenacity it has taken for them to channel their pain into power, transform their trauma into resilience, and develop a resolve to create knowledge and raise consciousness.

Feminist activist Srilatha Batliwala writes: "Movements are built by creating spaces where people can come together to think and speak radical thoughts and plan radical deeds to change their reality." In carving out such a space for themselves, these four Bohra women and many more of their fellow survivor-activists have been able to transcend their victimhood to become informed, equipped and empowered social actors and stakeholders working to change their reality.

It was in Mumbai in March 2023, at a closed-door meeting of different anti-FGM Bohra female activists from across the country, including some dialling in from the UK, US and Canada, that my desire to write about these women coalesced. Also present were two male allies, a few members of a civil society organisation working closely on FGM and one Sunni Muslim survivor of FGM from Kerala. Many discussions across the day dwelled on how the pandemic had slowed things down, how the Supreme Court PIL was in limbo, or how a

lack of funding or younger participation in the movement was causing a crisis of bandwidth.

These women continue to walk a tightrope in bringing their community's well-kept secret to the fore, at a time when a right-wing state has often co-opted minority issues and when Islamophobia looms large. At the beginning of their fight, they were often told outright not to take up the issue, especially in this political climate. But when is a good time to question and disrupt tradition or how things stand?

To this effect, Masooma, Samina and other colleagues are working on a bill to ban FGM in India, and are currently in strategic stakeholder consultations with legal scholars, medical practitioners, social activists and community members. They are grappling with questions such as the appropriateness of criminalising the practice and giving more power to a majoritarian regime, the necessity and ethics of incriminating mothers in cases of FGM, and the potential risk of invisibilising the practice by pushing it deeper underground.

Aarefa, Mariya and others, on the other hand, are making strides in trying to build solidarity with the global movement around FGM—entering into dialogues with women in which laws around FGM have made and repealed, countries where religious leaders today openly support the resurgence of the practice, countries where FGM has been medicalised, such as Indonesia, or countries like Mauritius and Maldives that are working hard to raise awareness of its prevalence in their own contexts.

Collectively, these survivors have done the work of digging deep and asking uncomfortable questions of their loved ones, their community members and their governments. And now they're doing the work of imagining what it would be like to reach the tipping point of a critical mass of 33% of a community that shuns the practice and starts to turn the wave. They're also imagining what it would be like for these survivors not to have to carry the onus to speak, advocate and move for change. They're imagining what it would look like if their state machinery supported their bid for their human rights, if their clergy admired rather than rebuked their courage and if there was a community that could support them openly and not in secret.

But the biggest and most enduring transformation is within themselves. This work has forever changed the way they move through the world, the way they

look at power structures that govern them, and the way they look at themselves.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank CREA and Nayantara Patel for supporting this project; Reya Ahmed, whom it was a joy to collaborate with; Alina Gufran for her invaluable encouragement and effort; Deepti Sharma and Divya Ribeiro for their creative advice and friendship; Srilatha Batliwala for generosity, words and wisdom. My biggest thank you to my mother Masooma Ranalvi, and all the other Bohra survivor activists who continue to shock, awe and inspire future generations.

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