

A MEDIA WORKSHOP ON

# FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

08.08.16

An official report for

**I**A**W**R**T**

SAHIYO INVITES YOU TO

PRESS CLUB, MUMBAI



**media**  
workshop

08. 08. 16

10.30 AM to 1.00 PM

reporting **sensitively** on  
female genital cutting

RSVP [sahiyo2016@gmail.com](mailto:sahiyo2016@gmail.com)

program supported by IAWRT  
[www.iawrt.org](http://www.iawrt.org)

# SAHIYO MEDIA WORKSHOP: A REPORT

On August 8, 2016, Sahiyo conducted its first media training workshop at The Press Club in Mumbai, India. The workshop was held in partnership with the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT), which had awarded a grant of \$700 to Sahiyo's co-founder, Priya Goswami, for the event. The aim of the Sahiyo-IAWRT Media Workshop was to train journalists on how to sensitively and effectively report on the practice of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) prevalent in the Dawoodi Bohra Muslim community.

Nearly 30 journalists attended the workshop, which involved presentations by all five Sahiyo co-founders and a screening of Priya Goswami's segment from Reflecting Her, the IAWRT Long Documentary - 2015.

At the end of the training, nearly all the participants responded with positive feedback about the usefulness of the workshop, and some journalists also reported the event in their respective publications.

## THE BACKGROUND

As a trans-national non-profit organisation formed 1.5 years ago, Sahiyo's mission has been to empower Dawoodi Bohra and other South Asian communities to abandon the practice of FGM/C through dialogue, education, collaboration and community involvement.

The organisation started out by conducting the first-ever large-scale online survey of Dawoodi Bohra women across the world to understand the nature and prevalence of FGM/C in the community. Since then, Sahiyo has received considerable international recognition for its research, public awareness campaigns, advocacy work and for creating an online story-sharing platform to build dialogue around FGC.



The logo for Sahiyo is written in Hindi script 'सहियो' in a stylized font. The characters are colored green and pink. The 'स' and 'यो' are green, while the 'हि' is pink. The letters are connected and have a flowing, artistic feel.

*united against female genital cutting*

Sahiyo's work has been an integral part of an unprecedented movement that has grown against 'khatna' (as FGC is known in the Bohra community) in the past year. In December 2015, an online petition by Speak Out on FGM had 17 Bohra women appeal to the Indian government to ban FGC, and the petition has received more than 50,000 signatures today.

In November 2015, three Australian Bohras were convicted for subjecting two minor girls to FGC and consequently, in February 2016, Bohra religious trusts in several cities in Australia, England, USA and Canada began issued notices asking their members not to practice 'khatna', since FGC is illegal in those countries. Even as debates on the practice escalated, the head priest of the Dawoodi Bohras made public statements in April and June claiming that the practice of 'khatna' is important for "religious purity" and must be followed.

All through these landmark developments, print and television media in India and abroad has played crucial role in reporting and raising awareness about Female Genital Cutting among the Dawoodi Bohras. For decades, the practice has typically been associated with African tribes and was virtually unheard of in India. So far, the Bohras are the only community known to practice khatna in India and for many, it has come as a shock that this small, otherwise-progressive sect follows a tradition that is internationally recognised as a human and child rights violation.

Given this context, news publications in India have taken active interest in breaking the silence and secrecy around khatna through interviews, reports, features and news documentaries. FGC, however, is a very complex and controversial issue that requires well-informed and nuanced reporting that is sensitive to the survivors and communities involved. This, at times, has been amiss.

News coverage of khatna among Bohras has been well-intentioned but often, journalists unwittingly misunderstand and misrepresent facts about the practice, and/or portray the issue in a sensational manner that can end up harming FGC survivors, girls at risk and the movement at large.

Sahiyo realised that this could be addressed only by generating more awareness amongst journalists about FGC in the Bohra community and the pros and cons of various styles of reportage on the issue. The media workshop on August 8, made possible by IAWRT, allowed Sahiyo to have a dialogue with media representatives on how to approach the topic of khatna in a culturally sensitive, non-sensationalized manner.

## THE WORKSHOP

The Sahiyo-IAWRT Media Workshop was held from 11 am-1.30 pm at The Press Club, Mumbai, followed by lunch for all participants and invitees. Invitations to the workshop were sent out to more than 40 print and television journalists in Mumbai from English, Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati media publications. Sahiyo also received informal support from the American Consulate in Mumbai, who sent the workshop invitations to journalists in their own networks.

On August 8, the workshop was attended by 26 participants, who were predominantly journalists and some independent writers and artists who are interested in working on the subject of khatna in the Bohra community. A representative from the Canadian Consulate in Mumbai also attended the workshop, since Sahiyo has initiated dialogue with them to reach out to Bohras in Canada.

The event was recorded by a videographer hired by Sahiyo as well as a video team from CNN Network 18, which is shooting a documentary on the movement against khatna in the Bohra community.

Outlined below are key highlights from all the presentations made by Sahiyo co-founders to train the participants on effective and sensitive reportage on khatna.

## INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS

Sahiyo co-founder Insiya Dariwala opened the training session with a general address on the role and significance of the media as an instrument of social change. Dariwala is an award-winning filmmaker whose short films have dealt with subjects like rape and child sexual abuse. She also runs The Hands of Hope Foundation, an organisation working with schools to raise awareness about child sexual abuse.

Her presentation covered the following points: Examples of recent news reports and media campaigns in India that forced authorities to act against injustices.

- How Sahiyo was formed and an introduction to Sahiyo's work on FGC in the past 1.5 years.
- An overview of the principles and values that guide Sahiyo's community-based, collaborative approach.
- The importance of social partnerships between the media and organisations/people working on the ground to effect change, and how such partnerships can help drive social movements.



This presentation was followed by a screening of Priya Goswami's segment from the IAWRT 2015 Long Documentary Reflecting Her, which gave participants a quick visual introduction to the way in which khatna is practiced by Bohras.

## ADDRESSING FAQs

The second segment of the workshop, presented by Sahiyo co-founder Shaheeda Tavawalla-Kirtane, focused on giving journalists a detailed and nuanced understanding of the practice of khatna in the Bohra community. Kirtane is a public health researcher at Observer Research Foundation, a public policy think tank in Mumbai. Her presentation covered the following points:

- What is Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, what are its four types as classified by the World Health Organisation, where it is prevalent around the world and how it has been condemned as a human rights violation by several international organisations, treaties and conventions. (India is a signatory to a number of these conventions).
- The history of the Dawoodi Bohra Shia Muslim sect and how the community evolved from its 10th Century origins in Yemen to its migration to Western India, and its current reputation as a wealthy, educated, distinctive and seemingly progressive sect spread out around the world.
- The types of FGC practiced by the Bohras (Type 1a and Type 4), the community's terms for the practice (khatna, khafz, female circumcision), how it is practiced on seven-year-old minor girls without consent.



- The possible physical, psychological and sexual consequences of khatna, particularly Type 1 that is practiced by Bohras.
- The numerous reasons given by Bohras for why khatna is practiced: these include curbing sexual desire, preventing promiscuity, maintaining hygiene, following religion/tradition, enhancing sexual pleasure, becoming a “good Bohra girl” and becoming eligible for marriage.
- What Bohra religious texts say about the practice of khatna - that it is done for physical and religious cleanliness.



- Key developments in the recent past, including the conviction of three Bohras in Australia for performing FGC on two girls, the “resolution letters” issued by various Bohra trusts in Western countries asking members not to practice khatna and the recent public statements made by the community's head priest promoting the practice of khatna.

This detailed explanatory session helped lay the groundwork for the more specific media training that was to follow in the next three sessions.



## WHY THE MEDIA NEEDS TO BE SENSITIVE

This segment by Sahiyo co-founder Mariya Taher emphasised the need for the media to prioritise the best interests of FGC survivors, use sensitive terminology and recognise khatna as a social norm rather than “brutal” or “barbaric” ritual. Taher is a graduate in social work and creative writing and has worked in the field of gender and domestic violence for nine years. She lives in Boston and has been working with the Massachusetts Women’s Bar Association to pass state legislation to criminalise FGC there.

Her session at the media workshop covered the following points:

- How the media can help bring an end to various forms of gender-based violence, by raising awareness, countering myths and showcasing positive stories of empowerment.
- How the media can also end up harming and jeopardising efforts to end gender-based violence, by compromising the safety and interests of survivors, by reinforcing myths and stereotypes, by sensationalising stories.

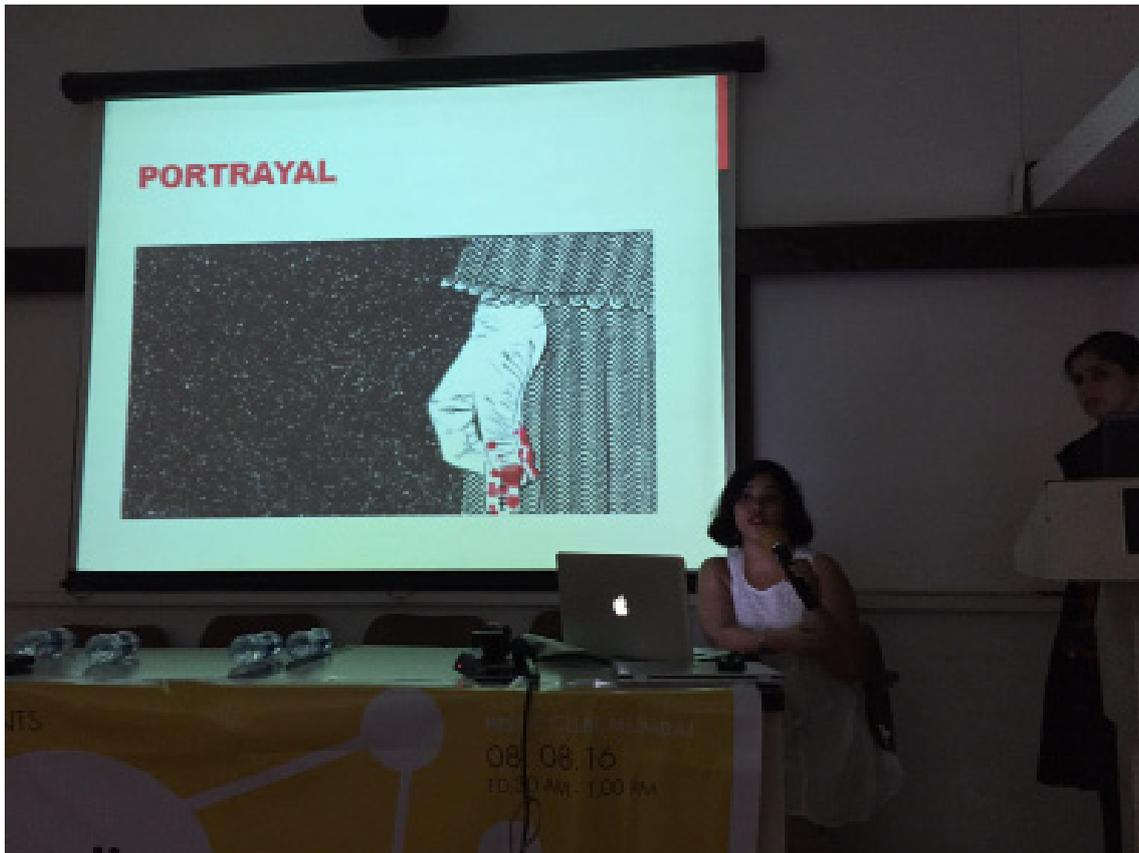
- To ensure the safety of a gender-based violence survivor, the media must not only respect privacy and confidentiality but also consider the retribution survivors could face if their safety is compromised.

How khatna, like many other traditional and cultural practices, is a social norm that people have followed over time because that is the acceptable thing to do in that society/community. Vilifying a community for its social norms is not an effective way of getting the group to abandon those norms.

- Avoiding judgemental language: Many media reports unintentionally end up vilifying the community by using value-laden judgemental terminology for khatna, like “brutal”, “barbaric”, “gruesome”. These terms make the community feel it is being attacked from the outside and they are more likely to then go on the defensive about the practice of khatna.

- Why Sahiyo chooses to use the term “cutting” instead of “mutilation” - FGC rather than FGM: because “mutilation” implies an intent to harm. Since khatna practitioners don’t intend to harm their daughters, the term FGM also puts them on the defensive. In interviews, the media would do best to use the term that the survivor herself is comfortable with, but in general, reporters could actually help rather than hinder the movement by using FGC instead of FGM.

- The importance of highlighting positive changes in the movement: By consistently reporting stories of empowerment of those who choose to end FGC in their homes, or statistics that indicate more Bohras would like to abandon khatna, the media can help change social norms.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF VISUALS

This segment, by Sahiyo co-founder Priya Goswami, focused on the pros and cons of using various types of visuals to represent FGC among the Bohras. Goswami is an independent filmmaker whose 2013 documentary, *A Pinch of Skin*, was the first film on the subject of khatna in the Bohra community. The film won a National Award.

Goswami's session covered the following points:

- Most media reports on khatna are accompanied by visuals that typically depict bloodied blades, female figures cut by blades or even stitched up vulvas. These visuals often end up evoking feelings very different from what the journalist or designer may have intended.
- The intention may be to sensitise readers/viewers, to evoke empathy with survivors, to build dialogue and to bring about change. Instead, such blood-and-gore visuals often merely have shock value and end up alienating the community. They may also end up triggering additional trauma for survivors.

- At times, images can also convey incorrect facts about FGC, by mixing up its four types and/or depicting generic Muslim community members even though they may not be Bohra or even Indian.
- Milder, less blatant symbolism in visuals is the preferred option for journalists.
- Generic photographs used in media reports on khatna must not compromise the identity or invade the privacy of individual community members - journalists could use generic images that showcase the community without highlighting individual faces.
- Contrasts of effective images versus ineffective, sensational images: examples from Stephanie Sinclair's photographic work on FGC in Indonesia as well as from existing news reports on khatna among Bohras.
- The importance of visuals that depict positive changes in the movement to end khatna.



## REPORTING WITH ACCURACY

The final session of the workshop, conducted by Sahiyo co-founder Aarefa Johari, highlighted various factual errors that reporters unwittingly tend to make while covering FGC. Johari is a journalist from Mumbai who works with online news publication Scroll.in.

Her session covered the following points:

- Journalists not only need to be unbiased, sensitive and responsible in their work but also need to take their roles as powerful agents of change more consciously.
- Factual errors in reports are understandable because khatna is a new and complex subject that needs to be understood from multiple angles - cultural, religious, medical, legal, gender violence, child rights and the perspective of the survivors. However, these errors must not be perpetuated.

- A common error is using the inaccurate term for the part of the genitalia that is cut - some don't refer to the clitoris, some even say vagina. The correct term is clitoral hood or prepuce.
- Examples of reports in which journalists misrepresented the health consequences of Bohra-style khatna (Type 1), by mixing it up with the consequences of other, more severe types of FGC practiced by other communities. This, too, puts the community on the defensive, because they feel they are deliberately being portrayed in the worst light possible. Community members are then unlikely to be receptive to activists.
- Examples of reports that have generalised the depiction of the way in which khatna is performed on Bohra girls, giving readers the false impression that all girls are held down and cut in dingy rooms by untrained midwives. In reality, khatna is experienced in myriad ways by different Bohras and these differences need to be acknowledged and represented.
- Second-hand reports on khatna among Bohras, often re-written paraphrases of original reports, are common. But such reports do not respect the privacy of survivors and often lose all nuances that survivors may have explained to the original reporter.



## Q&A AND FEEDBACK

At the end of the workshop, all Sahiyo members answered questions posed by the participants. Among other things, journalists wanted to know more about the role of Bohra men in abandoning the practice of khatna, the significance of the statistics that emerged from our survey and why Sahiyo considers khatna to be a patriarchal practice.

Sahiyo also handed out anonymous feedback forms to participating journalists, to assess the usefulness, quality and success of the workshop.

## SHARING OF PRELIMINARY DATA

At the media workshop, Sahiyo also released some preliminary data gathered in an exploratory online survey aimed at understanding the nature and prevalence of khatna in the Bohra community. This was the first such large-scale survey on the subject and Sahiyo conducted it from July 2015 to January 2016. Nearly 400 Bohra women from around the world answered the questionnaires emailed to them through the snowball method, and Sahiyo found that 80% of the respondents had been cut.

The preliminary results also indicated that an overwhelming majority of the respondents are not in favour of the practice of khatna and do not wish for the practice to be continued in the future. By presenting these findings at the media workshop, Sahiyo was able to emphasise the importance of reporting such positive changes in order to overturn the social norm of khatna.

The majority of the responding journalists claimed they found the sessions informative and helpful, particularly segments that highlighted the ways in which the media has been unintentionally giving incorrect information. Some pointed out that the do's and don'ts recommended in the sessions were useful.

Negative feedback given on the forms focused on some technical glitches in the beginning, the long length of the workshop and certain examples and anecdotes that strayed from the main topic of FGC. Some expressed a wish to hear more case studies of women who had experienced khatna, while one suggested bringing in a religious expert and a pro-khatna speaker to add to the debate.



#### MEDIA REPORTS ON THE WORKSHOP

A number of the journalists who attended the workshop wrote articles about it in their publications over the next few days:

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/female-genital-mutilation-only-1-in-10-who-underwent-fgm-want-it-done-on-daughters/story-4HVcaAl0v6AobPgwiFNRPJ.html>

<http://m.mid-day.com/articles/say-na-to-khatna/17509199>

<http://www.theweek.in/news/india/end-circumcision-of-girls-dawoodi-bohra-women.html>

<http://theladiesfinger.com/how-to-report-on-female-genital-cutting/>

Several other journalists, including those who could not make it for the workshop, have since then reached out to different Sahiyo members for interviews.

The workshop also led to a Gujarati language journalists seeking Sahiyo out for help for two features on khatna. This is vital for the movement to abandon FGC, since Gujarati is the mother tongue of most Bohras and all these years, Gujarati media had been silent on this controversial subject.



## CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNT

At the end of this largely successful media workshop, Sahiyo learnt that the training sessions on effective and sensitive reportage helped bridge a communication gap between the media and activists working to end FGC in the Bohra community.

The media has been extremely interested in covering this issue because it is a human rights violation that many feel strongly about. Sahiyo and other groups and individuals

involved in this movement are grateful and indebted to the media because it has been a huge driving force behind the movement to end khatna. This is precisely why it is important to ensure that the media understands the nuances and complexities of this issue in and out. By consciously avoiding factual errors, sensationalised visuals, judgemental language and unintentional vilification of the community, the media can be a much stronger and effective partner in furthering a landmark movement to end khatna among Bohras.

Since this workshop was conducted with just 26 participants in Mumbai, Sahiyo recognises that it was just the first step in the direction towards a more enlightened media. Raising awareness among journalists about the practice of khatna will need to be an ongoing activity.

Some of the news reports published after the workshop continued to use the terms “mutilation” and “FGM”, and the reporters who were present at the workshop claimed that this was because of editors who felt that the harsher word, mutilation, encapsulates what khatna is in a more accurate manner. Going ahead, Sahiyo recognises that it may be necessary to conduct similar trainings for editors too.

Sahiyo is now also working to adapt the curriculum of this workshop into a comprehensive media tool-kit. This will serve as a resource for journalists, writers, bloggers, filmmakers, designers and other organisations to understand how to effectively and sensitively talk about the practice of FGC in the Bohra community.

This tool kit will be available as a downloadable .pdf file on our website.

## THANK YOU