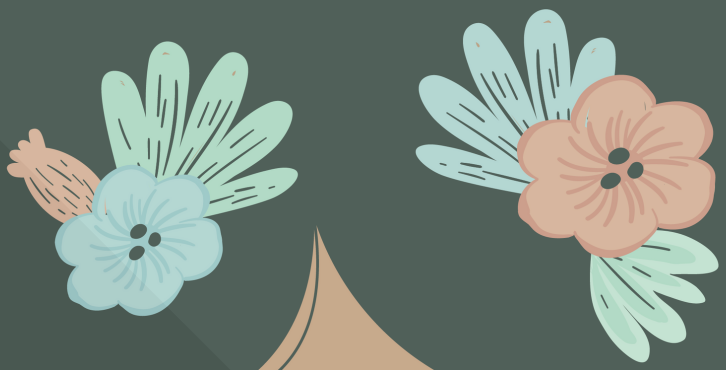
TALKING ABOUT FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING (FGC).

A RESEARCH STUDY ON THE CROSS-CURRENTS IN THE FGC MOVEMENT IN THE BOHRA COMMUNITY.



RESEACH STUDY BY REETIKA R. SUBRAMANIAN

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Talking about Female Khatna in the Bohra Community

A Study Report

2020-21

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For more information on the Mumkin App and the research study, please write to us at info@mumkinapp.com or visit www.mumkinapp.com

FOREWORD

Priya Goswami

Suppose I were to present the mainstay from the years of studying female genital cutting/mutilation (FGC/M). Female 'Khatna' or 'Khafz' (as it is also known in many Asian communities), is first and foremost, a social norm. Social norms are a complex phenomenon, and to understand them better, I believe it is important to suspend judgment and to begin by not picking sides to blame.

My position on not taking sides and not looking for the 'bad guy' might seem contradictory to my work as an advocate against the practice or outrageous even, depending on the reader's position. However, by examining the practice as a tradition first and not immediately jumping to judgment, we can understand why this phenomenon occurs and is propagated and build a room for dialogue on the heavily stigmatised subject at hand.

Female genital cutting/mutilation is a socially mandated tradition, passed down from generation to generation, sometimes purely based on mythic understandings of what it means to be an ideal woman in society. The practice doesn't pertain to any particular religion or cannot be ascribed to any one community. Also, as observed frequently, the contradiction lies in the oft-conjured image of an FGC/M practicing community member versus how they may be. For example, as FGC/M advocates, we often have to fight off labels such as 'tribal,' 'barbaric,' or 'uneducated' that people use for communities that practice FGC.

It is no wonder that the Dawoodi Bohra community, one of the most well-known FGC/M-practicing communities in the Indian subcontinent, finds it deeply uncomfortable to talk about this social norm or even explain it to the world outside that for them, it is a tradition that passes down with unquestioning belief from one generation to another. It is equally important to understand

that the community members who have grown up believing in the practice as a part of their culture may feel boxed, threatened, or even patronised when the world broaches the subject.

I would argue that the way a community member might think about the practice is a fundamental question that we should be accounting for first. I am also often thinking about the sense of alienation someone might go through, especially since the rising wave of Islamophobia has swept India and the world. Understanding and evaluating how community members might respond to Islamophobia and xenophobia is crucial if we want to move beyond preaching to the choir people who already believe that female Khatna is a form of Gender-Based Violence. We are, therefore, investigating challenges faced by people as they initiate a conversation on the subject of female genital cutting/mutilation, irrespective of their stance on the issue.

As a storyteller and communication designer, I have often engaged with the question, whose stories we are telling? Are we even equipped to speak on someone else's behalf? I believe we should pass on the mic to those who directly feel the pulse of the movement on a profound social level of their everyday lives, rather than limiting the conversation to albeit well-meaning advocates who engage with it on the level of creating discourse.

Through the Mumkin research study, we hope to bring out the many nuances that the movement against the practice of female genital cutting/mutilation has brought about in recent times. We also hope to shine a light on the many fissures that emerge while creating conversations on the subject, attitudes towards it and challenges faced by community members while engaging with the movement.

Mumkin is a space and tool for enabling conversations, and we hope to achieve the same through our research study by building a more neutral space where discussion is encouraged rather than clamped down. Our foremost aim is to bridge the gap between the two sides of the conversation,

pro-and against Female Khatna, to develop a more empathetic response, where there are no good or bad sides. Just people who are critically engaging with a tradition, which we as advocates hope becomes a tradition of the past.

Priya Goswami is the Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Mumkin LLP.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2011, an anonymous petition calling for the ban on khatna, the practice of female genital cutting/ mutilation in the Bohra community, surfaced online. While the petition initially garnered 3,400 signatures, in the past decade it has burgeoned into a full-blown public battle. From personal conversations and Whatsapp exchanges, religious sermons, and parliamentary debates, to legal trials and prime-time headlines, the practice of female khatna, khafz or sunnat has become a big topic of discussion in India, and globally. In the process, two clear camps have emerged: the anti-khatna advocates and the pro-khatna supporters.

Situated in the thick of these extremely polarised exchanges, this multidisciplinary feminist ethnography strives to document the experiences, feelings and struggles of the Bohra community as they understand, challenge and/or defend the 1,400-year-old ritual in their personal and public realms. It seeks to contribute to the small but growing pool of academic research that has so far been documented on the practice of FGC in South Asia.

Objectives:

With the contested opinions and tense silences as our points of departure, this study strives to:

1. understand the ways in which community members are talking about female khatna, and their communication challenges,
2. investigate the attitudes of community members towards the public movements and debates in favour or against the practice,
3. provide data to help bridge polarisation on the practice and the campaigns on female khatna,

4. recommend possibilities of building safe, inclusive, and dignified spaces for women and girls to engage with, communicate and reflect on their personal experiences of gender-based violence.

Methodology:

In order to initiate a deep dive into how the community receives conversations, advocacy on FGC/M, and to ensure both depth and scale, a mixed methods approach was adopted. We designed a multi-lingual questionnaire via Google Survey Forms, which included a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions that were divided into four key sections: (i.) prevalence of the practice, (ii.) conversations and exchange, (iii.) attitudes and feelings, (iv.) and campaigns and coverage. The questionnaire was made available in English, Gujarati and Hindi. In addition, we also analysed articles, opinion pieces and blog posts published publicly by community members on the websites run by Sahiyo (sahiyo.com) and Dawoodi Bohra Women's Association for Religious Freedom (https://dbwrf.org/) in the period between November 2017 and November 2020. The content from the public posts was used to trace and situate the ongoing campaigns and exchanges within the broader socio-political context of the community and the practice of female khatna.

Sample:

The multilingual questionnaire part of the study includes responses from 221 respondents, of which nearly 70% identified as female, 29% as male, and 1% preferred not to answer. The respondents came from 17 countries including India, USA, UK, Australia, Netherlands, UAE, Canada, among others. Of the 154 female respondents, more than 85% had reported to have been subjected to khatna as a child. Meanwhile, in terms of their stance on the practice, of the total

respondents, 80% opposed the practice, while 11% supported it. Approximately 9% of the respondents were not sure of their stance.

Key Findings:

Conversations and Exchange:

- More than 90% of the respondents have had one to several conversations on female khatna, while 9% have never been a part of a conversation before. In response to a multiple-answer question, nearly 68% of the respondents indicated that they have had conversations on female khatna with family members and relatives, 52% had spoken with people outside the community, and 43% have participated in discussions with other community members.
- The topmost preferred media of exchange includes face-to-face exchanges, personal Whatsapp/ text messages, and phone/video calls. In the case of conversations with people outside the community, the respondents also indicated the usage of their social media platforms.

Attitudes and Feelings:

- While 41% respondents said that it was either difficult or very difficult to have conversations with family members/ relatives, 58% respondents said that it was challenging to engage with other community members, including their religious leader or teacher, cutters, friends, doctors, and activists. Conversations with people outside of the community, meanwhile, were relatively easier, with 64% respondents indicating that it was either ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ to do so.
- The most common topics of discussion included the religious aspects of the practice, medical understanding, and personal experience/s of female khatna.

- More than 68% indicated that conversations should be done publicly, while 11% suggested that they should be kept private; 21% of the respondents, meanwhile, were unsure of their stance.
- Approximately 48% of the respondents indicated that they associated conversations on female khatna with feelings of empowerment, acceptance, representation, and comfort. On the other hand, 33% of them associated conversations on female khatna with feelings of discomfort, judgment, fear, nervousness, and misunderstanding. More critically, 19% stated that the conversations triggered feelings of anger.
- Nearly 74% of the respondents indicated that based on their experience so far, they would be interested in continuing to have future conversations on the practice. Among them, nearly 77% had already heard about or participated in campaigns related to the practice.
- On the other hand, nearly 4% of the respondents said they were not keen to have future conversations. Among them, 45% had never had previous conversations on the practice and 55% reported to have had only one conversation in the past.
- Around 22% of the respondents indicated a possibility (maybe) to engage further in the future.

Campaigns and Coverage:

- Nearly 89% of the respondents indicated that they had come across campaigns, articles and/ or activism against the practice of female khatna. In contrast, 66% stated that they had heard about campaigns, articles and/ or activism in support of the practice. The key sources of information included social media, news media and in-person exchanges.
- Among those who had come across anti-khatna campaigns, 53% respondents indicated that they felt understood and represented by the dialogues and debates, while 6% felt uncomfortable and hurt. Around 41% said that these campaigns made them think. Those respondents who felt

understood and represented indicated that these campaigns to end the practice reflected their personal beliefs, gave them the strength to share their personal experiences and reaffirmed a sense of not feeling alone. On the other hand, those who felt uncomfortable and hurt suggested that the anti-khatna campaigns made them angry, particularly the references to 'mutilation'. They also felt that it was too personal a matter to be discussed in public.

- Meanwhile, among those respondents who had come across the pro-khatna campaigns, 16% respondents felt understood and heard by the campaigns. They indicated that the campaigns defending the practice reflected their religious beliefs, protected the honour of their community women, and fostered a sense of belonging among them.
- On the other hand, 62% respondents felt uncomfortable and hurt. They suggested that the campaigns defending the practice dismissed women's pain and trauma and challenged human and child rights. Nearly 33% respondents also indicated that the pro-khatna campaigns made unnecessary comparisons to male circumcision. Around 22% said that the pro-khatna campaigns made them think about the practice.

Paving the way forward:

Backed by the different ideological standpoints, the study draws on the first-hand experiences and feelings shared by community members on speaking about the practice of female khatna. Based on their responses to personal conversations and public campaigns against and in defence of the practice, we make the following recommendations to pave the way forward:

- to create opportunities and mediate platforms of respectful exchange between community members with different political stances and standpoints on the practice of female khatna

- to build safe and secure platforms for community members to share and exchange experiences, ideas and feelings related to FGC,
- to include community men in conversations and discussions on the practice of female khatna
- to collaborate and build information and communication materials relevant to the practice
- to sensitise key stakeholders such as the media, lawyers, teachers and activists to speak about and disseminate public information on FGC in a well-researched and thoughtful manner.

This current research study trains the spotlight on the existing polarised factions within the community on speaking about the practice of female khatna, both, in private and public realms. By linking personal feelings with public narratives, this crucial research inquiry provides a springboard to mediate sensitive, inclusive, well-researched and collaborative exchanges on the practice of female khatna in the future. And while doing so, the study also critically analyses and amplifies the conversation around FGC/M in Asian communities; a conversation that has in the global discourse so far been restricted to African countries.

“My father has been strongly opposing female khatna for as long as I can remember, and that's where I learnt about it. I have not been circumcised but most of my Community has, and they all have a herd mentality with little to no scientific support of it. It's enraging because the only explanation anyone ever has is “because the religion says so” and that isn't enough. That's why I avoid talking about this with people in my community. It's enraging.”
Female, 18-25 years, Dawoodi Bohra, India (2020)

“I think this is a personal matter and should be restricted to people who practice the faith if they so wish to. People who do not identify as PRACTICING Dawoodi Bohras - i.e by name only - should not get to choose what happens to those of us who choose to practice the faith. As a human being, I keep myself to myself and do not go around telling other people how to practice Hinduism, Christianity, etc. If you do not like an issue with one religion, leave it. No one is forcing you to believe and practice. This is 2020; everyone needs to do as they see fit for themselves and their family. And no one has the right to take that decision away from me.”
Female, 36-45 years, Employed, Dawoodi Bohra, India (2020)

INTRODUCTION

The Culture of Cutting

In 2011, an anonymous signature campaign had surfaced on the internet. The petitioner, alias 40-year-old Tasleem, was mobilising support to "stop the barbaric genital mutilation of young girls in India (Ladkiyon par Khatna)." The petition plea read:

> "Imagine you're a 5-year-old girl. You're taken by your mother and family members you trust to meet a doctor. They hold your arms and legs, so you don't struggle. Then they take a blade and cut your genitals…This barbaric practice of female genital mutilation is still being practiced in India. Sadly, by the otherwise very progressive community of Dawoodi Bohras."[1] (Tasleem 2011)

Cut to 2021, and today, the anonymous signature petition has burgeoned into a full-blown battle, hogging headlines and the imaginations of health experts, human rights' activists, community leaders, politicians, and feminist advocates alike. The battle has been waged in the contested terrain of female khatna (also identified as *khafz, sunnat* or female genital cutting/ mutilation), a rite of passage in the Bohra community that involves the removal of the prepuce (the covering of the clitoris) of community girls at the age of seven. Promoted as an act of *taharat*, which refers to cleansing, hygiene or purity (Shelar, 2018), the ritual is believed to have been performed by the community for nearly 1,400 years and is an important marker of the 'sexual socialisation' of the community girls (Ghadially, 1991: p.17). The practice of female khatna, thus, has garnered much public attention in the past decade. It has been tabled in parliament, heard by different international courts of law, debated on prime-time news programmes, and defended in religious sermons.

[1] '*Ladkiyon par khatna khatam karo'* petition: https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-barbaric-genital-mutilationof-young-girls-ladkiyon-par-khatna (Last accessed on May 20, 2021). The anonymous petition was addressed to the Syedna, asking him to end the practice of khatna; it received 3,490 signatures. It is currently closed.

On the one hand, there have been voices that publicly challenge the Bohra woman's "private matter," calling it a "violation of the sexual rights of the women" that "found no mention in the Qur'an" (Barton, 2019). These conversations have echoed from the chambers of the United Nations General Assembly to the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Australia[2]; all calling it a "violation of human rights of girls and women" (Abrol, 2018). Newspapers and television news channels, too, have carried elaborate stories on "India's Dark Secret" (Baweja, 2016), "Say No to Khatna" (Ashar, 2016) and the "The horror of #FGM: Bohra community shames women by cutting genitals" (Hasan, 2016).

On the other hand, in retaliation to these anti-khatna voices, there are counter-narratives that began to emerge, where initial silence began to give way to staunch support, assertion and advocacy. In April 2016, the Dawoodi Bohra community's spiritual leader, His Holiness Dr. Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin made an indirect reference to the practice during the *wa'az* (a religious sermon) delivered in Mumbai (Das, 2016). The audio clip of this section of the sermon delivered in the *Lisan-ul-Dawat* language was circulated among Bohra social media groups. The Syedna was reportedly heard saying,

> "Whatever the world says, we should be strong and firm…It must be done…If it is a man, it can be done openly and if it is a woman, it must be discreet. But the act must be done... What do they say? ... that this is harmful? Let them say it, we are not scared of anyone." (ibid. 2016)

Furthermore, in April 2017, Sunita Tiwari, a Delhi-based human rights advocate, filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) seeking a ban on the practice. She argued that the practice was closely tied to female genital mutilation (FGM) and was discriminatory against women, violating Dawoodi

[2] In November 2015, the Supreme Court of New South Wales found a Bohra mother, a retired nurse, and a senior clergy member guilty of carrying out genital cutting on two minor sisters between 2010 and 2012. They three members were given a 15-month sentence for the crime. It was Australia's first female genital mutilation prosecution (Hakim, 2019).

Bohra women's rights to equality, privacy, and personal liberty. After Tiwari's PIL was admitted in the Court, other intervention petitions were also filed in the case, some supporting a ban on the practice, and one party (the Dawoodi Bohra Women's Association for Religious Freedom) defending FGC on the grounds that it is an "essential religious practice for the Bohras" (Kotak, 2018) .

The legal case and the public coverage on the practice began to create friction within the community. Several Dawoodi Bohra women supporting the practice also took to social media to publicly lodge their support, deeming it as a means to "belong", "feel beautiful" and "increase radiance on their face" (Shelar, 2017). There were open contestations on the vocabulary of 'mutilation' used to describe the practice, where survivors argued that their experience (Kotak, 2018). Thus, over the past decade, the exchanges on the "private matter" began to take place in public realms, with two clear camps emerging thereof, comprising the anti-Khatna advocates and the pro-Khatna supporters.

With these contested opinions and tense silences as our points of departure, this study strives to:

1. understand the ways in which community members are talking about FGC, and its communication challenges,
2. provide data to help bridge polarisation on the practice and the campaigns
3. investigate the attitudes towards the public movements and debates in favour or against the practice,
4. recommend possibilities of building safe, inclusive, and dignified spaces for women and girls to engage with, communicate and reflect on their personal experiences of gender-based violence.

As a study that is rooted in the community's history, experiences, and polarised viewpoints on the practice of khatna, finding a predetermined structure or a methodological toolkit to design it was a challenge. It was important for us to enable all respondents -- spanning different ideological standpoints, geographies, and generations -- to voice their ideas and insights with utmost safety and dignity.

Thus, early on, we constituted an Ethics Committee for the study comprising academics, community members and practitioners to guide us with the broader research approach. The committee members also closely vetted the research tools to enable us to narrow and deepen the scope of the project. The committee included:

- Dr Qudsiya Contractor, Junior Fellow at Max Weber Kolleg, University of Erfurt, and Dawoodi Bohra community member

Web: https://www.mmg.mpg.de/person/94619/14491

- Dr Gita Chaddha, University of Mumbai Department of Sociology

Web: http://archive.mu.ac.in/arts/social_science/Sociology/gita.pdf

- Dr Lakshmi Lingam, School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Web: https://www.tiss.edu/view/9/employee/lakshmi-lingam/

- Mariya Taher, MSW, MFA, co-founder, Sahiyo and Dawoodi Bohra community member

Web: https://sahiyo.com/about-us/cofounders/

- Dr Tobe Levin von Gleichen, visiting professor, Arts and Humanities Research Institute, King's College, London

Web: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/tobe-levin-von-gleichen

Building on the rich field experience and strong networks of the project's -partners, Vasavya Mahila Mandali and Sahiyo (India), we eventually adopted a multi-pronged approach to design the exploratory study by combining feminist praxis with the accessible field possibilities. The core focus of the study remained on identifying the existing nature of exchanges and the media used to talk about FGC with family members and relatives, community members, and people outside of the community.

Following the introductory section, the next two sections foreground the methodological underpinnings of the research, to clearly explain the demographic profiles of the respondents. The fourth section examines the conversations and exchanges on the practice of khatna by respondents with their family and relatives, community members and people outside of the community. Section five explores the attitudes, feelings and emotional experiences documented by the community respondents. The public contestation and campaigns both, in defence and against the practice of female khatna are demonstrated in the sixth section. Our conclusions are drawn in the final section.

“My immediate family is quite understanding about it. My parents never imposed the experience upon my sister and both my sister and mother actively oppose the practice. I myself have had partners in the past who have been through the experience and have opened up about the trauma and frustrations they have had to deal with since.”

Male, 18-25 years, Single, Employed, Dawoodi Bohra, France (2020)

“Generally , people have only had their information coming in from news media or social media which is very one sided. When people ask me how I feel about it there is an automatic expectation that I will be against it. However, when they find out that I am not, there may be a feeling that they may see my perception as wrong. The conversations in social media are so accusatory and negative that it has often had a negative impact on association with this practice. Which had never been the case before.”

Female, 18-25 years, Married, Employed, Dawoodi Bohra, India (2020)

RETHINKING METHODOLOGIES

This section begins by foregrounding the different methodological tools used to pursue this research enquiry. It further also calls into question our ethical considerations, negotiations made amid the COVID19 pandemic, and study limitations. The design of the study is geared towards linking perceptions and experiences of speaking about female khatna.

At the very onset of the study in May 2020, we had planned to undertake in-person exchanges through intimate interviews and focus group discussions. However, the dynamic spread of the COVID-19 pandemic hurled several unexpected challenges and delays at us. The nationwide lockdown made it impossible for us to travel and meet with groups in-person. The situation compelled us to re-examine ways to suitably adapt to the changing contexts, while also ensuring safety, inclusivity, and participation. Even as the virtual space provided us with the opportunity to negotiate some of these barriers, we were conscious of the challenges of digital access and divide. Accordingly, we designed the study using a set of mixed tools, including:

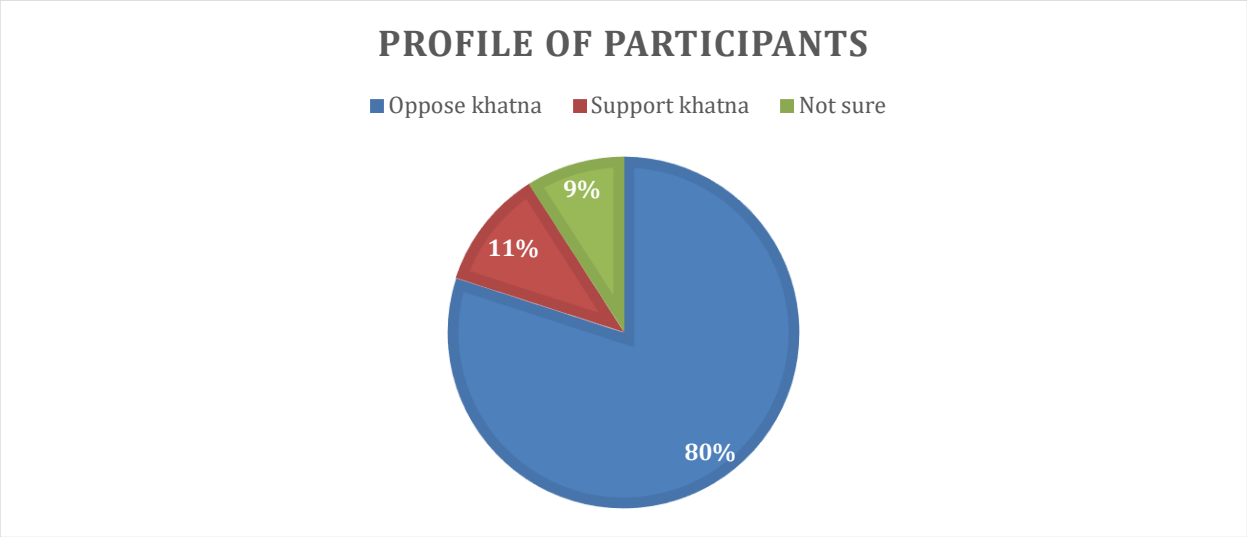
- **Multilingual online questionnaire:**

To ensure both scale and depth, we designed a multi-lingual questionnaire via Google Survey Forms, which included a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions divided into four key sections: (i.) prevalence of the practice, (ii.) conversations and exchange, (iii.) attitudes and feelings, (iv.) and campaigns and coverage. In order to test for reliability and validity of the tool, we invited members of the Ethics Committee to read through the set of questions to assess for bias and to make sure the questionnaire was a culturally acceptable tool for the exploratory study. After making necessary changes based on their feedback, in addition to the English version, we translated the online form into two other languages, including Hindi and Gujarati. This ensured a wider inter-generational and inter-regional reach (affixed as annexures).

In addition, the questionnaire was deliberately designed in a manner to go deeper into the particular ways in which the community members/ respondents felt about a particular campaign. Through several linked, multiple answer questions, the idea was to bring out the feelings behind the polarisation more organically and clearly. In fact, the respondents also shared their personal experiences and challenges in great detail in response to some relatively non-formal, open-ended questions. Further, to reduce potential triggers, we ensured that most questions remained non-mandatory, and did not warrant forced responses in order to advance in the survey.

Once we fixed loose ends, the questionnaire was initially released to members of the Bohra community through Whatsapp and private emails. The questionnaire was open only to adult, FGC-practicing community members. We reached out to members standing on both sides of the contestation, inviting them to submit their responses on this anonymous tool. In the weeks ahead, through snowball sampling, the questionnaire reached different groups of people.

The online questionnaire was available between August 30, 2020 and October 31, 2020. In the two-month period, we received 221 responses in all, of which 24 forms were submitted by members supporting the practice of female genital cutting/ mutilation.



Even as the percentage of pro-Khatna respondents was small, it is indicative of the larger community divide on the subject on the ground, as well as the challenges of building inclusive spaces for all. So far, most research enquiries have been undertaken and published in silos, where only unidimensional accounts of the practice have been put forward. Thus, one of the key contributions of this research are the participation and insights of community members holding distinct ideological standpoints on the practice. In addition, the questionnaire was also open to community men, a demography that is often left out in the conversations on the practice. Of the total number of respondents in the study, 64 (~30%) identified as male.

- **Reading social media posts in context:**

In addition to the multi-lingual questionnaire, we also analysed articles, opinion pieces and blog posts published publicly by community members on the websites run by Sahiyo (sahiyo.com) and Dawoodi Bohra Women's Association for Religious Freedom (https://dbwrf.org/). Sahiyo is a non-government organisation founded in 2015 whose purpose is to advocate women rights and end the practice of FGC, particularly among the Dawoodi Bohra community in India and globally. As a part of its community outreach, the organisation has published a set of digital stories, personal narratives under the aegis of 'Voices to End FGM/C' on their website. DBWRF, meanwhile, is an online platform established in 2017 that is "dedicated towards conserving and guarding the cultural and religious rights of Dawoodi Bohra women". It "advocates for the rights of Dawoodi Bohra women in India to ensure that Dawoodi Bohra women in India live with dignity and honour and are able to exercise their religious & cultural rights, including their right to practise Khafz (female circumcision)" (DBWRF website, 2021). The online community, which claims to represent "74,959 registered supporters", has published various blog posts and research papers pertaining to

the practice including an 'Open letter to Maneka Gandhi'[3], former Union Minister of Women and Child Development.

This is the first such public initiative where community women who support FGC as a religious practice have spoken out. While the main trigger for the establishment of this group was the PIL in the Supreme Court filed by lawyer Sunita Tiwari in 2017, DBWRF's social media campaigns have openly challenged the work undertaken by Sahiyo. One of the early hashtags that was created and promoted by the group said, "I am a Dawoodi Bohra woman and Sahiyo is not my voice." (Shelar, 2017)

Thus, for the purpose of this exploratory study, selected public posts published by both the groups between November 2016 and November 2020 were identified. The contents of the public posts have been used to trace the ongoing campaigns and exchanges within the broader socio-political context of the community and the practice of female khatna. The idea to include these posts emerged mainly to overcome the challenge of having a relatively limited participation from the pro-khatna defenders in the questionnaire. The findings from the multilingual online questionnaire will be situated and analysed against the backdrop of these exchanges.

- **Ethical Considerations:**

There were no physical or psychological risks related to this study, however there was the possibility that some points in the questionnaire could make respondents feel uncomfortable. We vetted the language and questions after consulting with the Ethics Committee members. All respondents were asked to complete a mandatory consent form at the very beginning of the multi-lingual online questionnaire to ensure that they were eligible and fully (voluntarily) willing to

[3] The letter was published on the DBWRF blog. It can be accessed here: https://dbwrf.org/blog_details/6

participate. The questionnaire was only open to members (a.) of a community that practices Khatna/ Khafz/ Sunnat/ female genital cutting, (b.) who were 18+ years old and of sound mind and health, (c.) who understood the purpose of this questionnaire, and were participating in it voluntarily, and (d.) were willing to grant permission for the data generated from the online questionnaire to be used in research undertaken on this topic. The respondents were also reminded that their identities would remain fully confidential, and they were not obligated to answer questions that they did not want to.

In addition, considering how conversations on khatna are heavily clamped down, we critically analysed the media available to us for the dissemination of the questionnaire. The choice of the medium needed to reflect on how sensitive conversations on social media were mediated. We chose private and direct messaging as our main medium to uphold the privacy of our respondents. While distributing the questionnaire, we also realised that some conversations were being monitored on social media. Thus, even as anti-khatna groups took to the questionnaire keenly, in the case of some pro-khatna and 'mixed' groups, the form was actively discouraged. However, this method of purposive, snowball sampling through Whatsapp and direct messaging, protected the respondents' privacy and granted safety from trolling.

These risks were minimised by keeping the research data in a secured database of which only researchers had access. To ensure anonymity of the respondents, no identifying information, such as names or email addresses, were asked in the questionnaire. In addition, we also shared our email address (talkingaboutfgc@gmail.com) to address their concerns more personally. In fact, during the process of data collection, some respondents wrote to us to clarify their eligibility status and express concern over the nature of certain questions. Others, particularly those who supported the

practice, also expressed their skepticism in completing the survey. We engaged with them via email exchange over a period of time.

- **Data Analysis:**

All raw data emerging from the multi-lingual online questionnaire was organised into analytical categories using open and axial coding techniques. An analytic comparison method was adopted to reflect the similarities and differences of standpoints and experiences indicated by the different FGC-practising community respondents. In the case of the qualitative, open-ended questions, key themes were identified, and responses were grouped under common headings based on a close, critical analysis. The text from the qualitative responses have been used as direct quotes in the report. A similar approach of coding and grouping was adopted while analysing the public posts published on Sahiyo and DBWRF. The posts had to further be read and analysed within the context of the broader, public discussions on khatna given that the focus of the study was on the ways of communicating and exchanging information on the practice, and not on the first-hand experience of the practice itself.

- **Limitations:**

While early drafts of this research study were chalked out before the COVID19 pandemic hit us, the actual work of collecting responses and analyses was undertaken amidst the burgeoning Thus, it became inevitable for us to rework on our primary methods and tools, and we had to depend heavily on the virtual medium of data gathering. Early on, we became aware that a full digital exploration would bring with it concerns of digital access by the study's constituents. While we made attempts to ensure the questionnaire was inclusive by including translations in Hindi and

Gujarati for non-English speaking or fluent participants, the online questionnaire was difficult for those without access to laptops and smartphones to participate in it. Similarly, given the existing polarised nature of conversations on the practice, it was challenging for us to obtain an equal number of respondents from either side of the debate. We personally wrote to community representatives, posted the links on relevant Whatsapp groups, and even engaged in open email exchanges with members who were apprehensive to fill out the multi-lingual questionnaire. We received personal messages from community members who said that they were discouraged on private groups to engage with activists and the study. However, even as only 11% of our sample defend the practice of khatna, their voice remains very crucial in this research and conversations in the future.

“Unfortunately till after my two daughters were born and circumcised, I wasn't even aware of Female Khatna. My wife and other in-laws handled it in Mumbai while I was at Kozhikode. I was only told, each time, that there is *"meethi shitabi"* function. Perhaps they thought I knew what it meant but I did not. It was only after my third daughter was born and I was asked to make the arrangements that I learnt about it. I immediately said, "no we won't do it". I know quite a lot about Islam, and I instantly believed that it can't be something made compulsory in *Islam* (in contrast to male Khatna which is logical and instantly acceptable).”

Male, 66+ years, Employed, Dawoodi Bohra, India (2020)

“It [having conversations] enables me to bring the correct picture in front of the world, as khafz is a harmless religious practice, which is unfortunately painted as FGM. Also, I feel by spreading incorrect information about the practice, our peace loving, educated community is victimised.”

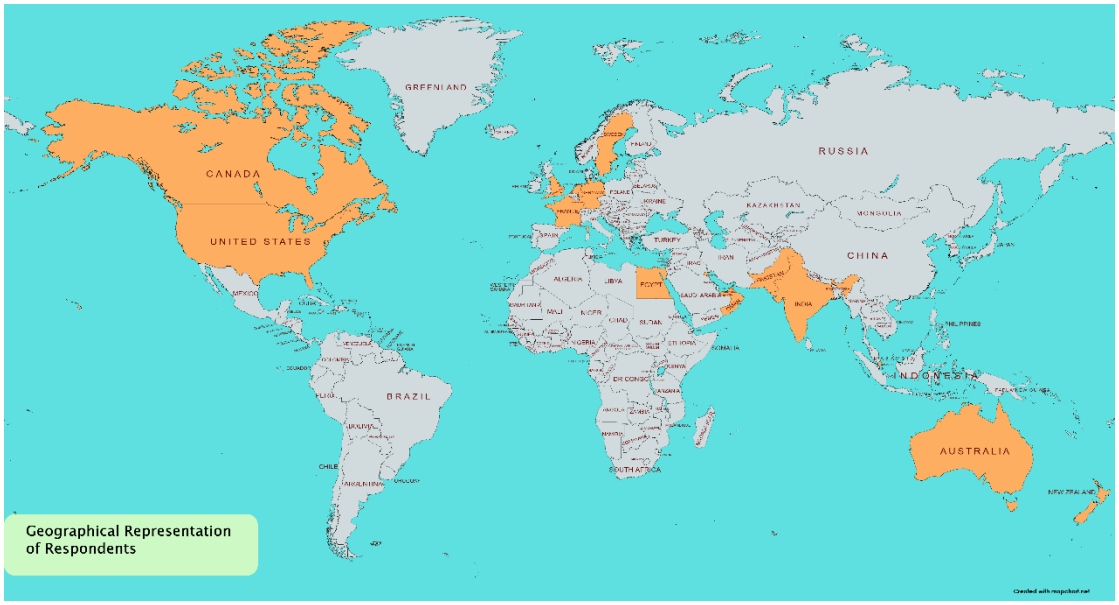
Female, 46-55 years, Employed, Dawoodi Bohra, India (2020)

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

This section digs deeper into the social and demographic profiles of the respondents of the study. At the very beginning of the questionnaire, specific demographic information was collected to establish the broader profile of the respondents. Responses to these mandatory questions, none of which could be used to 'identify' the community members or compromise their anonymity, were collected to locate responses from the 221 respondents within broader demographic threads, which include:

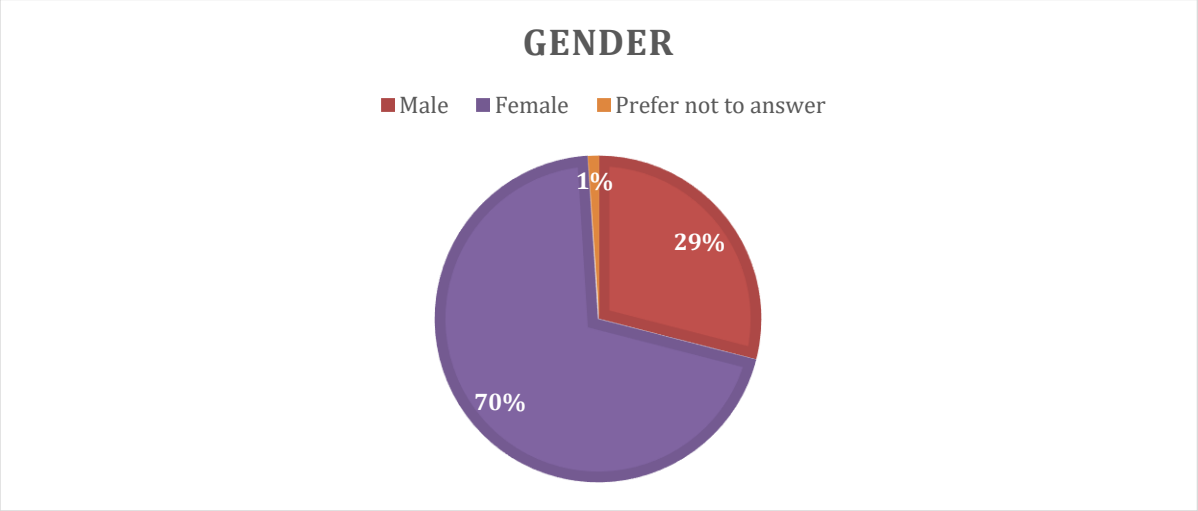
- **Geography:**

FGC-practising community members from 17 countries completed the online questionnaire. The countries included Australia (3), Canada (7), Egypt (1), France (1), Germany (1), India (159), Kuwait (1), Netherlands (2), New Zealand (1), United States of America (30), British Virgin Islands (1), Oman (1), Pakistan (1), Singapore (3), United Arab Emirates (4), United Kingdom (4) and Sweden (1).



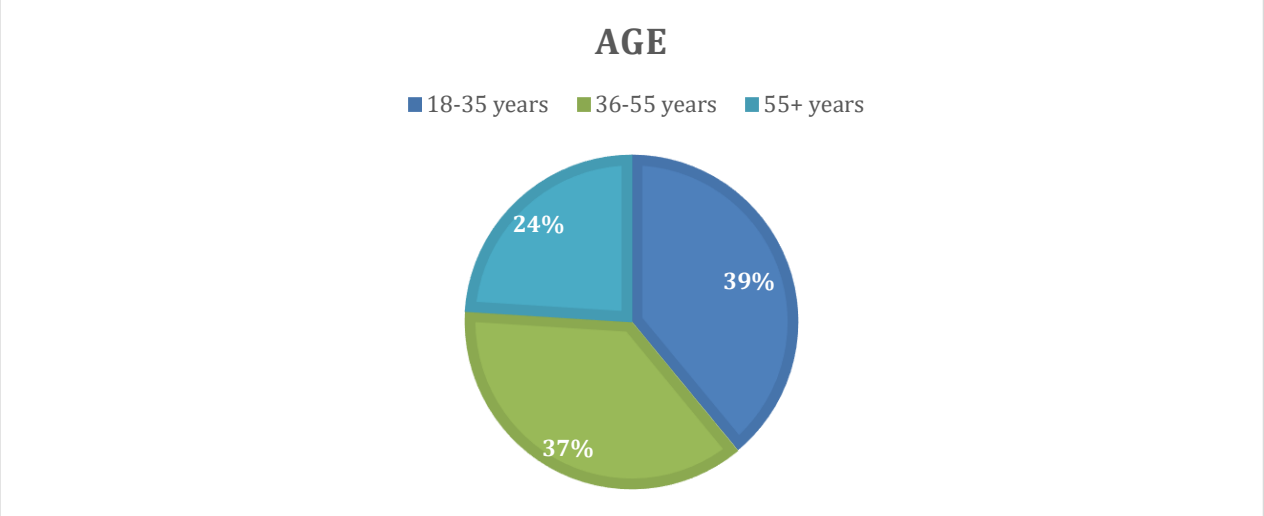
- **Gender:**

Of the 221 respondents, 70% (n=154) identified as female, 29% identified as male (n=64), and 1% (n=3) preferred not to answer.



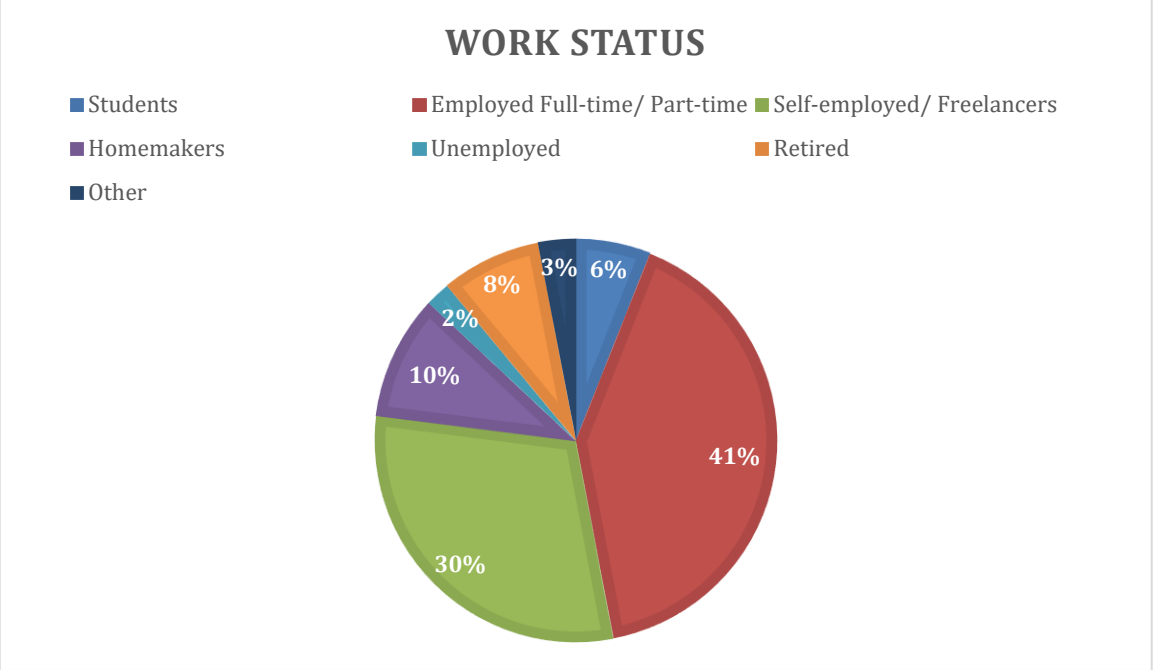
- **Age:**

The questionnaire was completed by respondents belonging to different age groups, including 39% of youth (18-35 years); 37% of respondents between the ages of 36 and 55 years, and 24% respondents who were 55+ years.



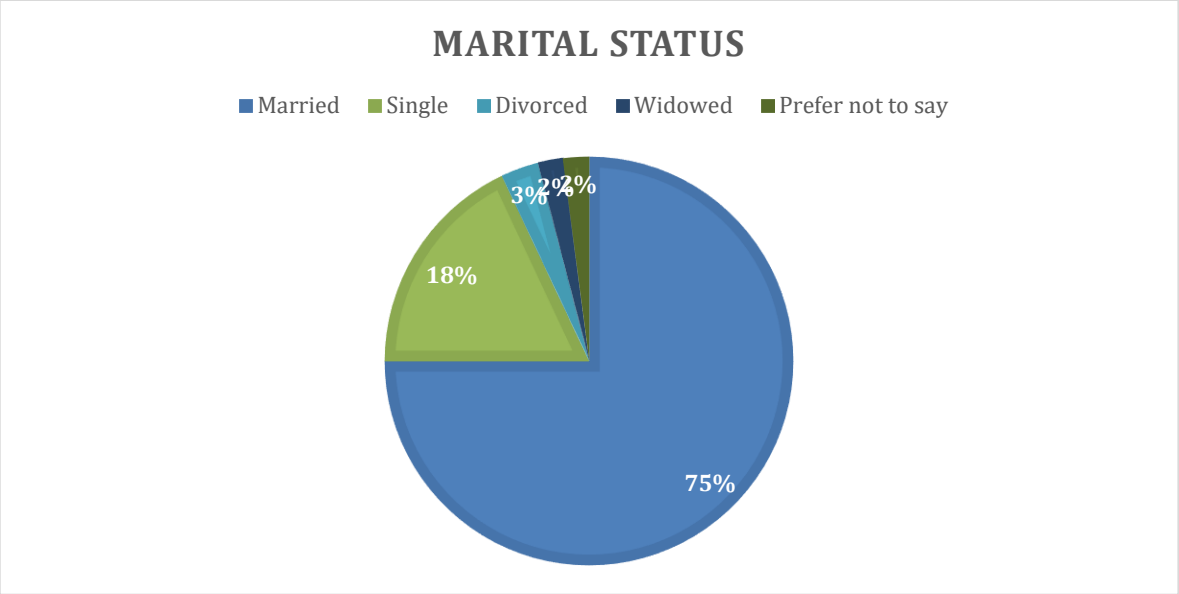
- **Work status:**

The questionnaire included respondents at various stages of the employment cycle, including 6% (n=14) students, 41% (n=91) working as full-time/ part-time employees, 30% (n=66) self-employed/ freelance professionals, and 10% (n=23) homemakers/ housewives/ househusbands. In addition, four respondents were unemployed, 18 had retired, and there were five who chose 'other'.



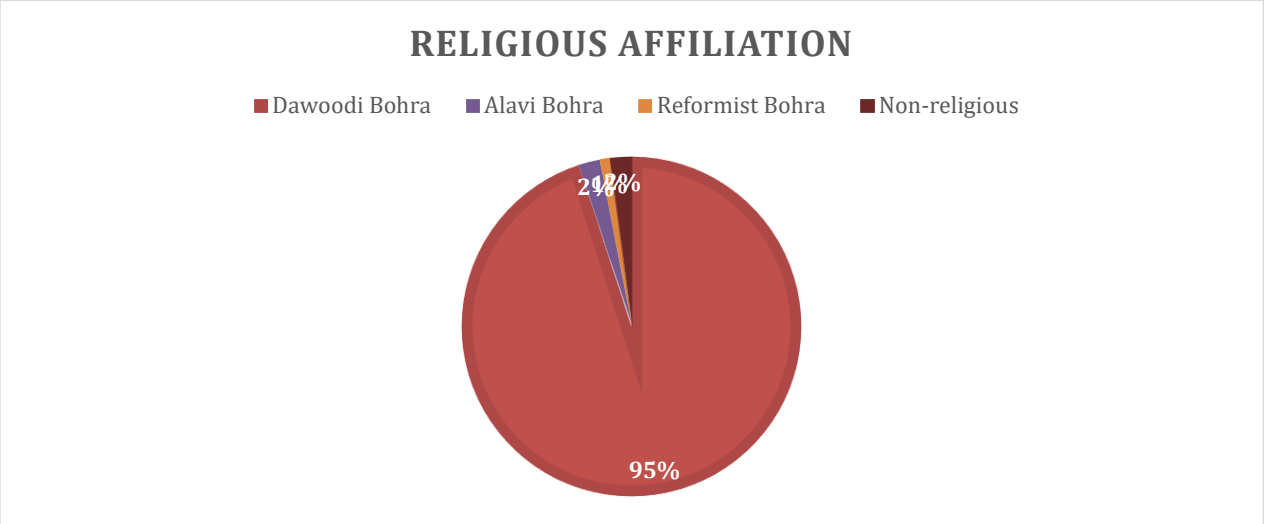
- **Marital Status:**

Nearly 75% of the respondents were married (n=165) followed by 18% (n=40) who were single. Seven respondents were divorced and five were widowed; four respondents preferred not to say.



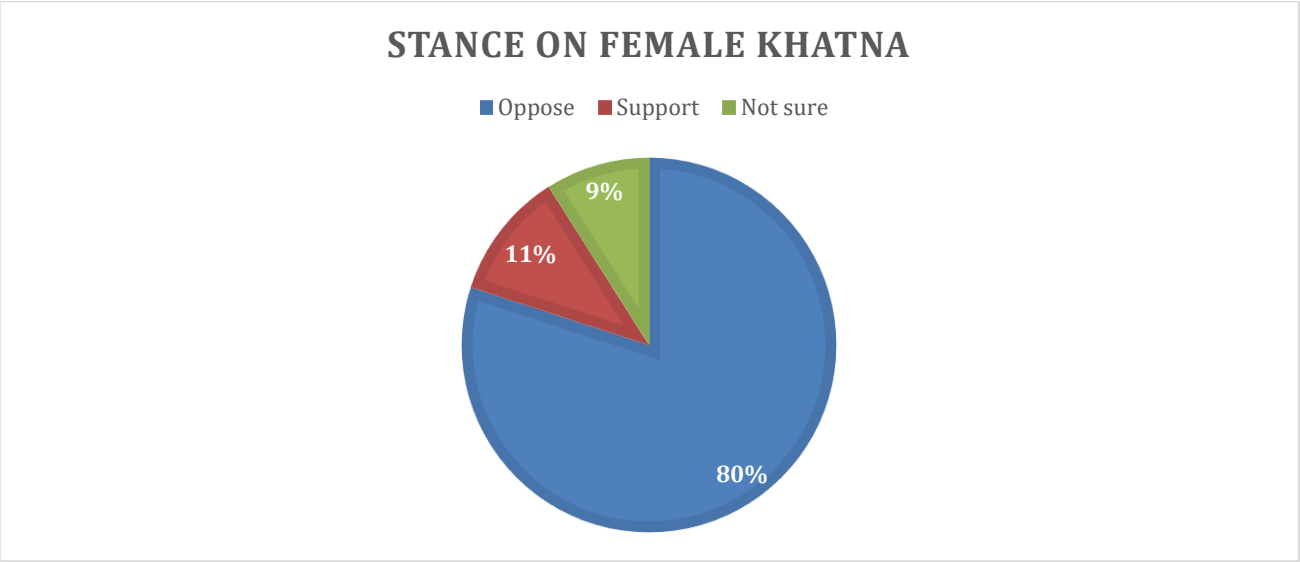
- **Religious affiliations:**

The respondents grew up with different religious beliefs, predominantly within the Bohra community. Nearly 95% (n=208) among them were Dawoodi Bohras, followed by 2% (n=5) Alavi Bohras and 1% (n=2) of Reformist Bohras. Four respondents indicated that they were non-religious. Among them, 76% (n=169 respondents) said that they continue to identify with the same religious faith that they grew up with, while 22% (n=49 respondents) stated that they no longer did so; approximately 1% (n=3) identified as atheists.



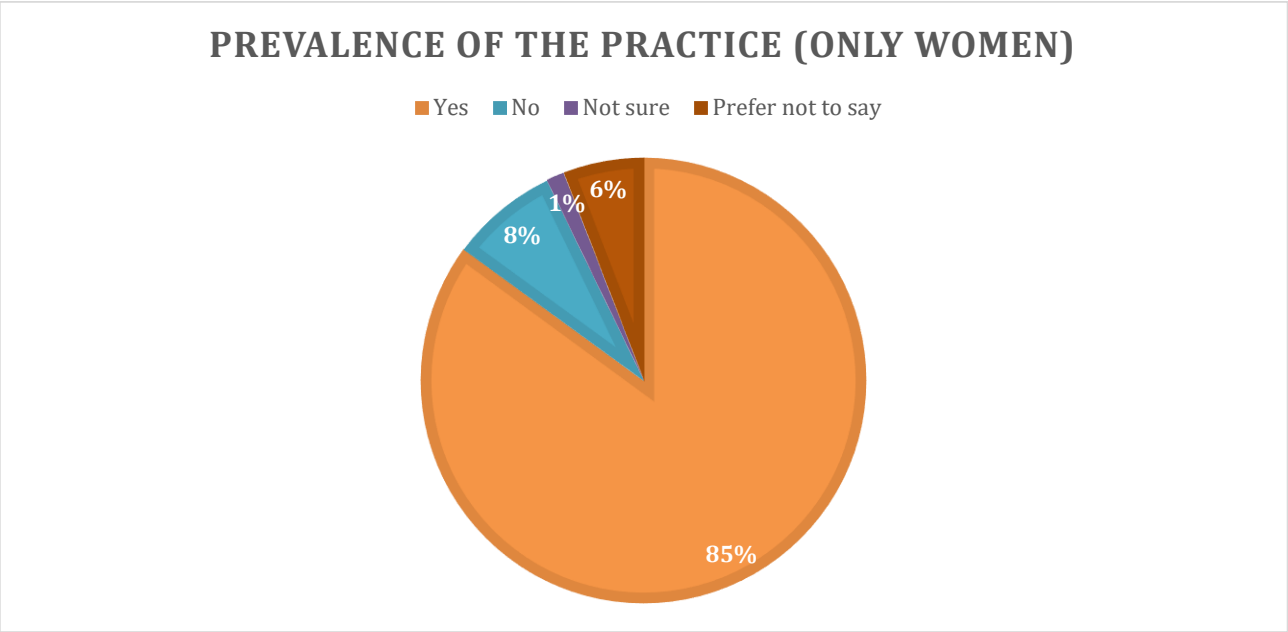
- **Stance on khatna:**

In response to the question, "I _____ the practice of khatna", the respondents indicated diverse personal standpoints. While approximately 80% (n=178) of the total respondents opposed the practice, 11% (n=24) supported it. Approximately 9% (n=19) of the respondents were not sure of their stance. "I support Khatna but also strongly believe that humans have the right to their body, and Khatna should not be forced," indicated one respondent (2020).

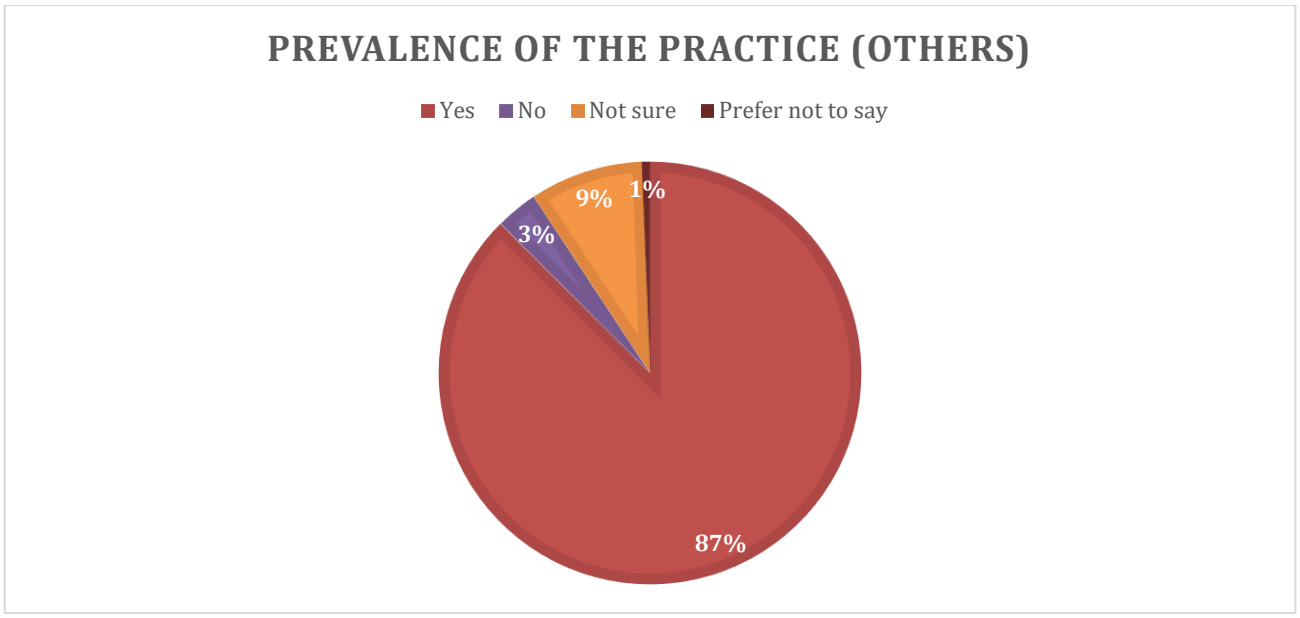


- **Prevalence of the practice:**

Among the female respondents, nearly 85% (n=131) respondents had reportedly undergone khatna, and 12 had not been cut. In addition, two of them were unsure and nine respondents preferred not to say.



While reporting on the prevalence of the practice, meanwhile, 86% (n=190) respondents reported that females in their family and friend circles had been cut, while 3% (n=7) respondents said that they didn't know of any in their groups. In addition, nearly 9% (n=19) respondents said that they were unsure. "I guess many, not disclosed to me," said one female respondent from India (2020).


PREVALENCE OF THE PRACTICE (OTHERS)
Yes
No
Not sure
Prefer not to say
1%
9%
3%
87%

“The first few times I have had the conversations, they were very hard. I was extremely enraged and anxious. I have confronted my parents about it and held them accountable and responsible for what my sister and I have been through. I’ve called out on their practices and behaviours. When I write about it also, the rage begins to surge in.”

Student, 26-35 years, Married, Dawoodi Bohra, India (2020)

“When speaking to political or church leaders in the West, I felt that I was being treated like an uneducated person (despite having a PhD), because false propaganda about FGM in general and the misunderstanding of our practice. The misinformation is terrible and comes about because of years of anti-FGM campaigning.”

Male, Retired professional, Dawoodi Bohra, United Kingdom (2020)

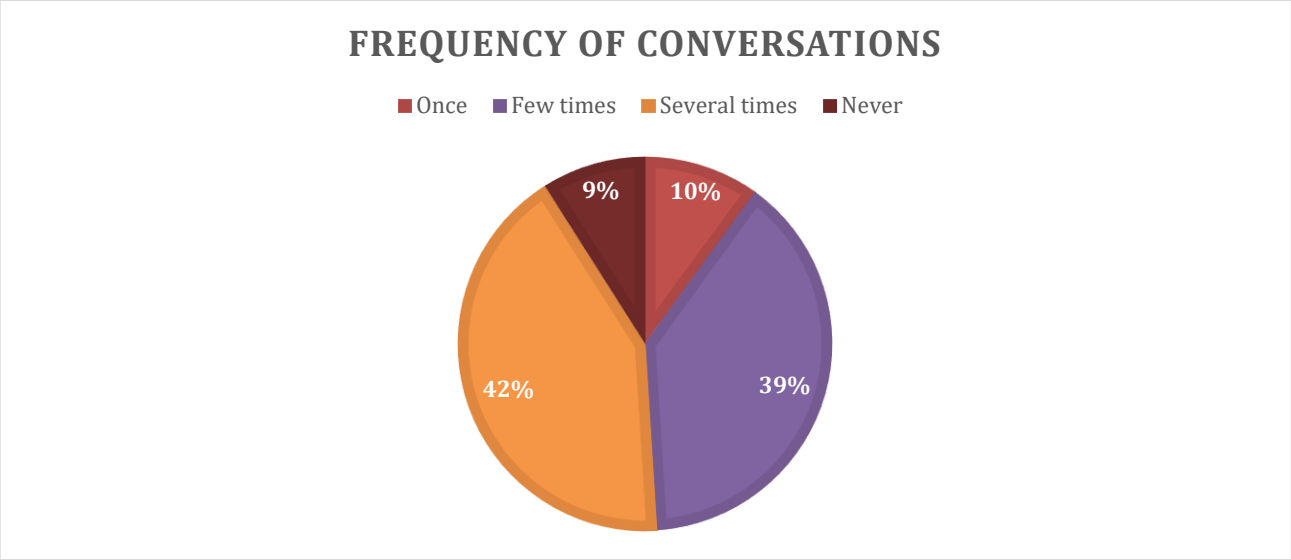
CONVERSATION AND EXCHANGE

Given the taboo associated with speaking about female khatna, this section illustrates the present extent and nature of conversations and exchanges on the practice reported by community members. By focusing on the key conversation partners involved, as well as, the most preferred media used to facilitate these exchanges, the chapter understands the ways in which community members are talking about female khatna, and their communication challenges at a more personal, everyday level.

The main conversation partners include (a.) family members and relatives; (b.) other community members including religious leader or teacher, cutters, friends, doctors, activists, among others; (c.) and people outside of the community such as friends, teachers, health workers, therapists, activists, colleagues.

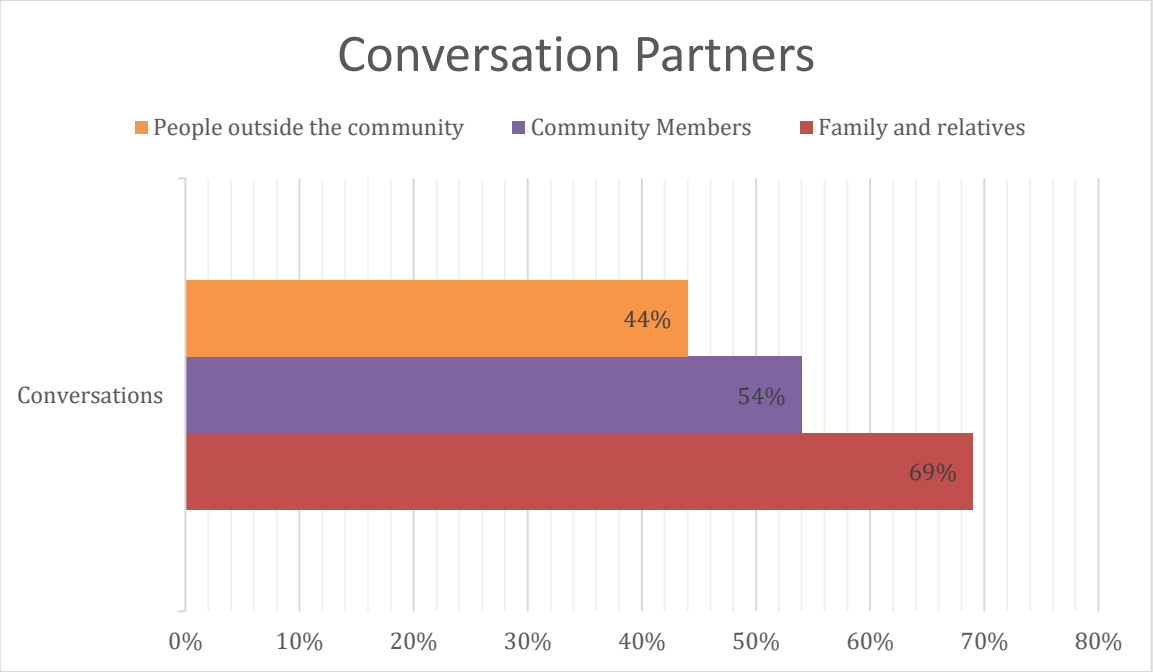
- **Frequency of Conversations:**

Of the 221 respondents, more than 90 % (n=202) have engaged in one to several conversation/s on the practice of female khatna, online or offline. “Had very few interactions. Loyalists don't want to hear anything that is against their religious head,” reported a female respondent from India (2020). On the other hand, nearly 9 % of the respondents (n=19) had never been part of a conversation on khatna before.



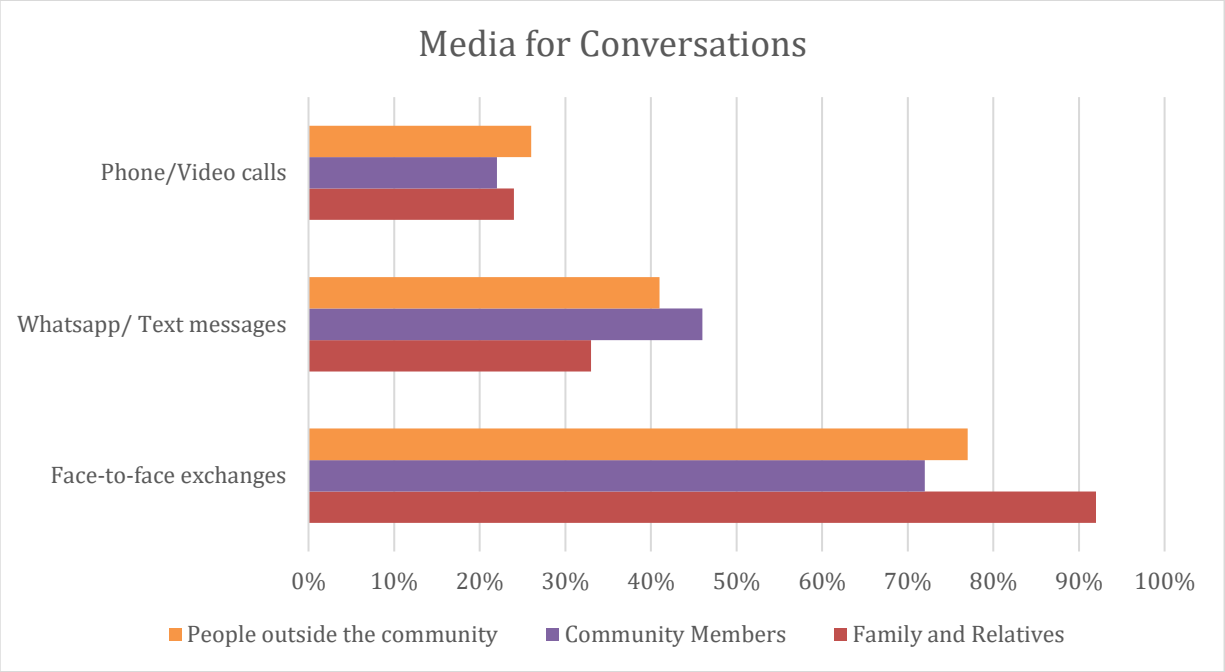
- **Conversation Partners:**

In response to a multiple-answer question, nearly 69% (n=152) of those questioned indicated that they have had conversations on female khatna with family members and relatives, 54% (n=119) had spoken with people outside the community, and approximately 44% (n=96) have participated in discussions with other community members.



- **Media for Conversations:**

In the case of those who have had conversations with family members and relatives, 92% (n=140) of the respondents reported (multiple answer question) to use face-to-face exchanges, followed by 33% (n=50) and 24% (n=36) respondents who used personal Whatsapp/ text messages and phone/video calls, respectively. Only 13% (n= 20) respondents indicated that they broadcasted group messages on Whatsapp and other chat applications.



Meanwhile, for conversations with other community members, again, a majority of the respondents (72%; n=69) indicated that they preferred face-to-face exchanges. Beyond the in-person exchanges, the respondents also gestured towards personal Whatsapp/ text messages (46%; n=45) and phone/ video calls (22%; n=21) as the other media they preferred for discussions and debates with community members.

For conversations with people outside of the community, too, the order of chosen media remained the same. This included face-to-face exchanges (77%; n=92), personal Whatsapp/ text messages (41%; n=49), and phone/ video calls (26%; n=31). Other popular media included social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (22%; n=26), and email exchanges (13%; n=15).

- **Initiating Conversations:**

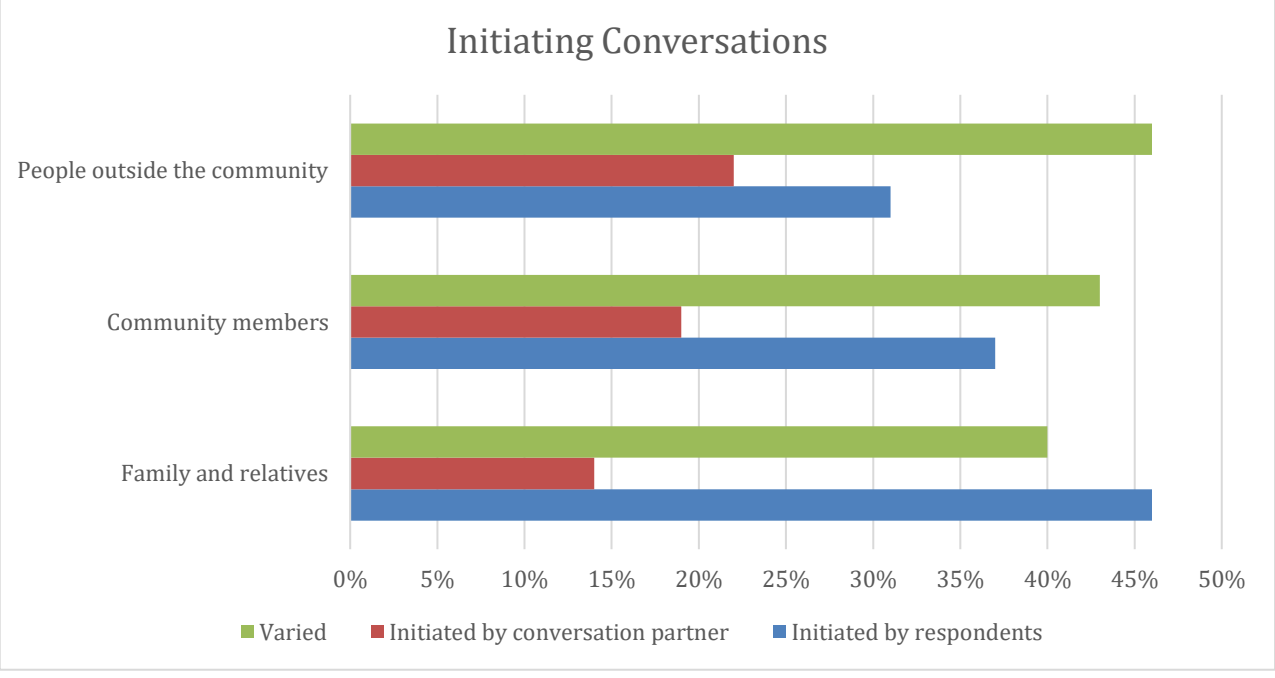
Based on their own experiences of discussing female khatna with different stakeholders—family, community members, and people outside of the community- the respondents identified the persons

initiating the conversation. According to them, the role of the person making the first move largely depended on (a.), the conversation partner, and (b.) the situation/ setting.

In their dialogues with family members and relatives, 46% of the exchanges were initiated by the respondents themselves. In contrast, 14% of the conversations were initiated by the other family member or relative. Nearly 40% said that it varied based on the situation.

In the case of dialogues with other community members, the respondents indicated that 37% of the exchanges had been initiated by them, while 19% were initiated by their partners, which included friends, priests, older women, among others. More than 43%, however, indicated that it varied.

Finally, in their exchanges with people outside the community, the respondents reported that they have themselves initiated 31% of the exchanges, while 22% of people outside of the community initiated the conversations. Nearly 46% said that it varied.



“My parents completely deny it happening and shut down and change the subject when I bring up how I was diagnosed with PTSD because of this practice. My twin sister who had it done with me also had PTSD from it. I have one cousin who is openly in support of the practice and I found that the community really doesn't acknowledge the mental trauma this practice causes, probably because of the stigma against seeking mental health help. A few of the bohra men I know that aren't that devout are against it, but I haven't brought it up to any devout men. I found that speaking to my American friends and mother-in-law (she is Caucasian) got the reaction I was hoping to get from my parents - which was empathy and concern.”

Female, 26-35 years, Married, Self-employed, Dawoodi Bohra, USA (2020)

“Many times, when I spoke to people outside of my community, they looked down on us as they identified khafz as FGM, only after detailed discussion, I was able to provide the correct information and enable them to see the truth. That was very satisfying to see to it that the truth finally reached.”

Female, 46-55 years, Employed, Dawoodi Bohra, India (2020)

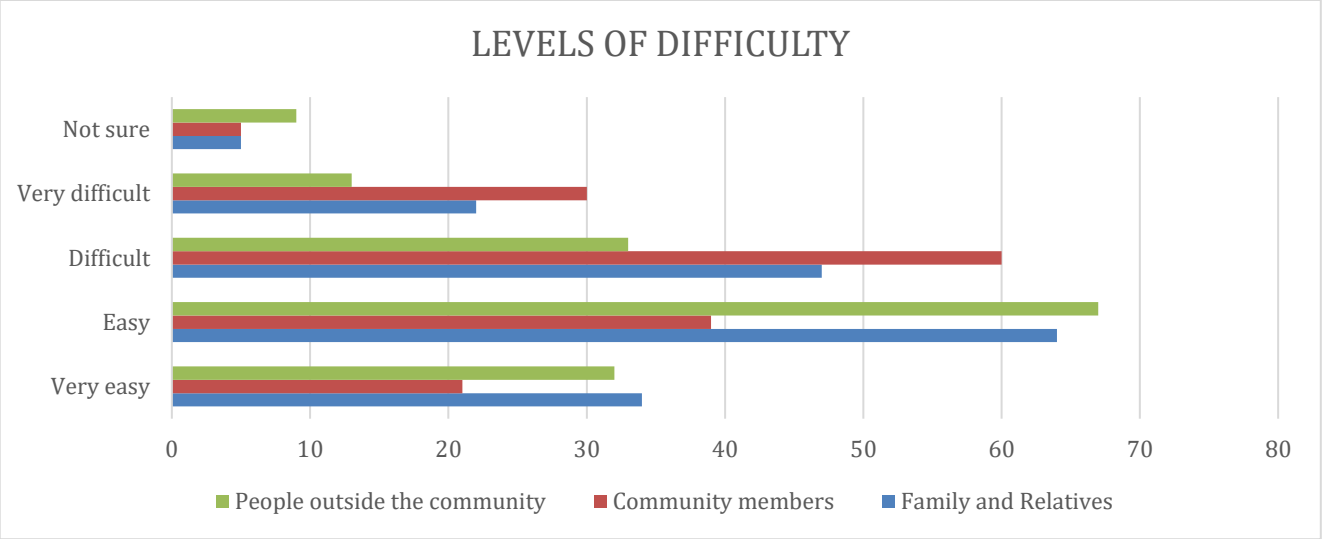
LOOKING OUT, LOOKING WITHIN

Documenting Attitudes, Emotions and Feelings

This section attempts to understand and document the levels of challenge, anxiety, and aspiration of members from FGC-practising communities in their conversations and exchanges. It further illustrates some of the major topics of discussion on the practice with the different key stakeholders. In doing so, we seek to understand the genesis of the polarisation between the two opposing camps better. Most questions in this section of the questionnaire were non-mandatory. The respondents were encouraged to provide more qualitative answers to share their emotional experiences and perspectives. Some key findings include:

- **Levels of difficulty:**

In terms of the difficulty levels in having conversation/s on female khatna, respondents indicated that it varied based on the conversation partner. While 41% respondents said that it was either difficult or very difficult to have conversations with family members/ relatives, 58% respondents said that it was challenging to engage with other community members, including their religious leader or teacher, cutters, friends, doctors, and activists. Conversations with people outside of the community, meanwhile, were relatively easier, with 64% respondents indicating that it was either ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ to do so.



Reflecting on her own personal experience, one respondent summed up the varying levels of difficulty while engaging with different stakeholders by saying,

> "With family, they shut down and denied the practice being done to me even though I know it was. With one cousin who supported it, she was Pro and felt strongly about the religious obligation. With friends outside the community, they were more worried and upset for me and strongly opposed the practice. All of them didn't know it was a thing and looked into it after I shared my experience" (2020).

Some respondents also shared their personal struggles of engaging with family members and relatives on the practice. One anti-khatna activist working with WeSpeakOut said,

> "I wrote research papers on the practice during undergrad for which I interviewed and talked to a few of my family members. Later, I also tried to talk my cousin's wife into not getting FGC done for her daughter. She is a strong believer of Dawoodi Bohra religion, and a huge supporter of Syedna, thus, it was extremely difficult to talk to her. She considered me non-religious, non-believer, and thus, didn't want to take me seriously. I sent her articles and other learning resources on the practice. But I doubt she went through them. She ended up posting and promoting the Dawoodi Bohra women that support the practice. At one point I used to post a lot of matters against the practice on social media, I was discouraged quite a bit by family and relatives" (2020).

Another respondent said, "People personally at an individual level feel that the practice is harmful but face a backlash when they are vocal about their views within family or community and are asked to keep silent on the matter" (2020). Echoing her experience, another female respondent

from India said, “It makes me feel that I am talking about a lost cause when dealing with family relatives. Easier to do with the outside community” (2020).

Further, there were references to the age of the conversation partner, too. For instance, one female respondent from India said, “The younger generation male and female were easier to talk to and explain and better received than the older generation” (2020). Another respondent said, “With friends inside the community, I only have male friends, and all opposed the practice. They were around 26-28 years of age and are not leaders in the Dawoodi Bohra sect and do not really practice it” (2020). Another young respondent responded saying, “From discussions with cousins, sisters, from family and friends of my generation, I have found that 90 % are against the practice” (2020). On the other hand, some respondents indicated that it was easier to have these exchanges with family members. She said, “Very comfortable with family and relatives but face little bit opposition while having a talk with other community members” (2020). Another respondent echoed a similar experience. She said: “My parents were very supportive and encouraged me to talk about it further. But my extended family and relatives stopped talking to me because I speak about the topic which is hush hush and also because they follow it” (2020). A pro-khatna female respondent said that it was actually most challenging to speak to people outside of the community. She said, “friends and relatives think it’s business as usual, especially women! Outside of the community people think this is medieval and abhorrent” (2020).

In addition to the conversation partner, respondents also suggested that the levels of difficulty varied with time. For example, one female student respondent from India said: “The first few times I have had conversations, they were very hard. I was extremely enraged and anxious” (2020). Another respondent added:

> “My conversations began with friends my age from the community, and it came to me as a shock that others might have gone through what I did at age seven. That was the first time I felt

inclusive and basically, not alone...From there on, I have started researching and talking to members outside the community to understand their experience without this practice as part of their life journey. Over the course of time, my own mother has been open to discussing this. As I have questioned and researched for myself, so does she" (2020).

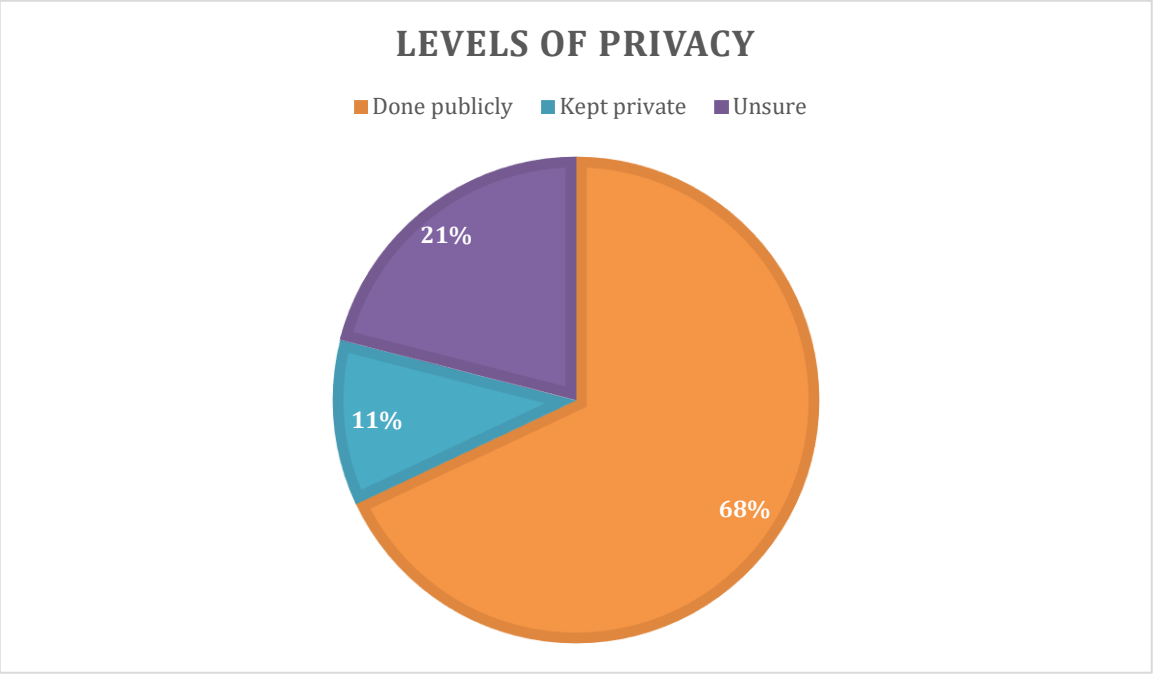
- **Topics of discussion:**

In the case of topics discussed during these exchanges, respondents highlighted a broad range in this multi-answer question. Of the total respondents who answered the question, the most common discussions were on the religious aspects of female khatna (78%), medical understanding (61%), and personal experience/s of khatna (59%). Other topics included conversations on understanding the practice better (51%), campaigns, media coverage and activism (49%), besides the legal cases filed against community members (45%).

These topics of discussion further varied with the conversation partners. For instance, a female respondent from India said, “With family I’ve gotten to learn why they follow the practice and what their understanding of it has been. With friends it’s more of a discussion on the religious and legal implications FGM/C has. With community and people outside of it, it’s about recent cases or my understanding of FGM/C and what they think or know about the topic” (2020). Meanwhile, a staunch supporter of the practice from the USA (2020) said, “I feel the practice is misrepresented and lumped into one category.”

- **Levels of Privacy:**

On the scale of privacy, of the 177 respondents who responded to the non-mandatory question, 68% (n=121) indicated that conversations should be done publicly, while 11% (n=19) suggested that they should be kept private; 21% (n=37) of the respondents, meanwhile, were unsure of their stance.



While reflecting on personal experiences of maintaining privacy on the subject, one respondent indicated that it depended heavily on the conversation partner. She said: “Even with family members, the conversation is extremely private, and I have only spoken to my female relatives and my brother about it. When I spoke to my brother about it, I felt responsible to inform him that this was a practice that happened in our community, one that he was completely unaware of. And when speaking to my mom, it took a lot of coaxing to get her to speak to me about it. My family has strongly cautioned against me speaking of it within my community, in fear of the consequences. In contrast, when speaking to members outside my family, I feel completely free and able to speak without judgement- for most people, I educate them about the practice and don’t feel scared that my opposition will be so heavily judged or lead to something bad.” (2020)

- **Feelings and Emotional Bearings:**

The respondents associated a diverse range of feelings and emotions with conversations on the practice of female khatna, irrespective of their ideological standpoints. Approximately 48% of the respondents indicated that they associated conversations on female khatna with feelings of empowerment, acceptance, representation, and comfort. All of them reported to have already had one to several conversations on the practice with different stakeholders in the past. Their conversations were mainly focused on the medical aspects of the practice, the legal cases that had been filed against community members, and the activism and campaigns in defence and against the practice. On the other hand, 33% of them associated conversations on female khatna with feelings of discomfort, judgment, fear, nervousness, and misunderstanding. A majority of them, more than 75%, reported to find it either “difficult” or “very difficult” to have conversations with family members and relatives, as well as with people within the community. Interestingly, 50%

among them reported to find it either “easy” or “very easy” to communicate with people outside of the community. “I think this has depended -- some of have been supportive and have even said they would change their own behavior. That the activism efforts I have engaged in have inspired them to rethink their views, which is amazing. Others have called me a disgrace to the family and have cut ties. It's a mix of both and it's often hard to navigate the ups and downs of this,” reported a female respondent from India (2020).

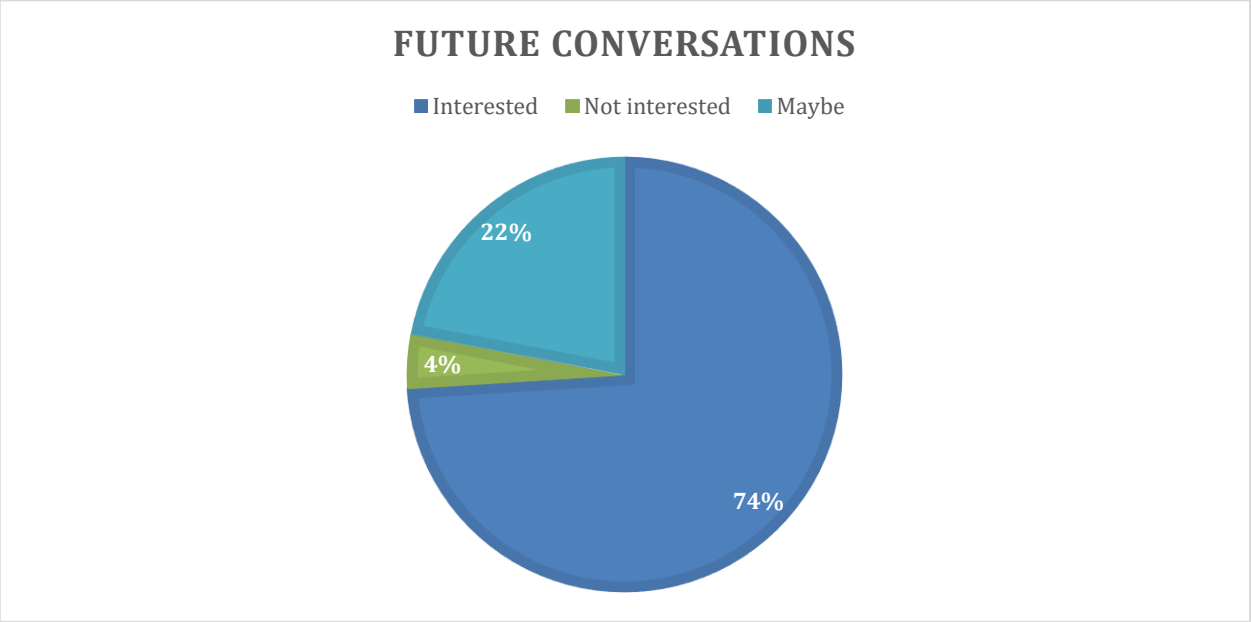
More critically, 19% stated that the conversations triggered feelings of anger. These respondents reported to have had few to many conversations on the practice in the past. Nearly 92% among them were opposed to the practice; the remaining supported the practice. One female respondent from Australia (2020) said: “Depends on who I’m speaking to. Comfortable with family members. Nervous with others.” She further added: “Immediate family is very open to discuss all issues FGM included. It’s always a relaxed discussion. With others you need to tread carefully.” Another female respondent from the USA (2020) said, “I am met with a lot of silence usually. People don’t know what to say to me as a victim.” Community members supporting the practice indicated that they felt a deep sense of judgement and anger from the outside. According to a pro-khatna advocate from India (2020), “Many times when I spoke to people outside of my community, they looked down on us as they identified khafz as FGM, only after detailed discussion, I was able to provide the correct information and enable them to see the truth. That was very satisfying to see that truth finally reached them.”

Amid the polarised viewpoints and mixed feelings, some respondents also gestured towards making everyday negotiations in both, their personal and public spaces; their relationship with the mother being key. While they acknowledged the practice to be a violation, they also believed that it was difficult for them to cast the complete blame on their mothers. “I have no hard feelings

towards my mum, who believed in it [female khatna] innocently without realising that it was my right to know what is done to my body…I, as a mom of a girl, now have ensured my child never goes through this, and also try convincing other mums who probably are open to take advice," reported a female respondent from UAE (2020). Another young female student from India (2020) echoed her feelings. She said, "From my conversations about Khatna, I have realised that some mothers did it simply because they had no other choice and alternative perceptions of the practice."

- **Speaking up/ with, in the Future:**

Nearly 74% of the respondents indicated that based on their experience so far, they would be interested in continuing to have future conversations on the practice. Among them, nearly 77% had already heard about or participated in campaigns related to the practice. On the other hand, nearly 4% of the respondents said they were not keen to have future conversations. Among them, 45% had never had previous conversations on the practice and 55% reported to have had only one conversation in the past. In addition, around 22% of them indicated a possibility (maybe).



Among those respondents seeking to engage further, most suggested the need to scale up and strengthen the scope of the existing conversations. "Till date I have had no conversations as my daughter is grown up and married. Since female khatna activism is hardly five years old approx hence educated members are now aware of female khatna through media, social media, TV debates, etc. and many legal court judgements. My opinion is female khatna conversations to be made public, TV debates, regular features in print media every month to make more awareness in the Dawoodi Bohra community," said a retired male respondent from India (2020), opposing the practice. A few respondents suggested it was important to involve more community men in these exchanges. "More active anti-khatna campaigns require involving men also," said a senior male respondent from India (2020).

A key suggestion was the need to facilitate exchanges between members standing on either side of the debate. "Sometimes the conversations don't have a conclusive end. A lot of people don't support FGM/C but are indifferent towards the practice which really doesn't lead our conversation anywhere. I've also spoken to people who understand what I have to say but try to rationalise the conversation which can be frustrating and disappointing at times, but I've learned to acknowledge other people's opinions and still express mine," said a young female respondent from India (2020). Another female respondent (2020) opposing the practice said, "I would like to be more clear on the points why people are supporting it and what arguments do they draw in the context of FGC practice." Another respondent said (2020), "I think it is important for people who promote the practice to explain why it is being done in relevance to today's times and not 50 or 100 or more years ago."

Meanwhile, respondents advocating for the practice suggested that there was a need to clear misconceptions. As a part of the pro-khatna rhetoric, a strong sense of *othering* was promoted in order to validate and justify the practice and the stance of the community. According to a retired male respondent from the UK (2020), "It is very important the difference between the Bohra Khafz practice and other practices in Africa are understood and the conflation between the two is removed."

In addition to expanding the scope of the conversations in the future, some respondents said that it was important to protect the well-being of the women. "It should be done sensitively because there are many who are indeed victims and to relive the experience is indeed a nightmare," said a self-employed female respondent from India (2020). Another respondent from the USA suggested the need to focus on the mental health of the women. She said (2020), "In addition to data collection and surveys like these, we need to push donors to also invest in mental health and trauma-informed spaces for survivor healing. The data collection and stories are critically important to push for change, but we also need to safeguard the storytellers while we are unearthing the stories. In survivor-led movements, where trauma survivors are helping to heal other survivors-- we need to recognise and honour the heaviness of the work by integrating more clinically trained, mental health professionals into the work."

Even with family members, the conversation is extremely private, and I have only spoken to my female relatives and my brother about it. When I spoke to my brother about it, I felt responsible to inform him that this was a practice that happened in our community, one that he was completely unaware of. And when speaking to my mom, it took a lot of coaxing to get her to speak to me about it. My family has strongly cautioned against me speaking of it within my community, in fear of the consequences. In contrast, when speaking to members outside my family, I feel completely free and able to speak without judgement - for most people, I educate them about the practice and don't feel scared that my opposition will be so heavily judged or lead to something bad."

Female, 18-25 years, Student, USA (2020)

"Almost everyone had a bad memory of the procedure. They were told lies when being taken for the khafz act. When I asked about the pain of the process, they said it was temporary. No one has any problem in their sexual life because of khafz. As claimed by a few activists that it instills a feeling of inferiority complex, no one reported such feeling of inferiority. Medical doctors who oppose it said that khafz for females is not scientifically proven as in the case of circumcision of male. But they say that hoodectomy is proven medical science. I fail to understand how khafz is different from hoodectomy with the only difference being a doctor versus a trained non-medical lady performing it."

Male, 36-45 years, Married, Self-employed, India (2020)

WHEN THE PERSONAL BECAME POLITICAL:

CAMPAIGNS AND COVERAGE

This section of the report foregrounds the personal exchanges against the backdrop of the broader public campaigns and conversations against and in favour of the practice of female khatna. The focus was on understanding the levels of awareness and the feelings attached to the advocacy and activism. Here are the findings:

- **Awareness of campaigns:**

Nearly 89 % respondents indicated that they had come across campaigns, articles, and/or activism against the practice. In a multiple answer question, the respondents indicated that the main sources of their information included social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (83%), followed by news media (59%) and in-person exchanges (49%). Other sources of information included films/ documentaries (~21%), conferences (~12%) and school/ college (3%).

In contrast, 66% of the respondents said that they had come across campaigns, articles, or activism in support/ defence of the practice. Their main sources of information (indicated via a multiple answer question) included social media (83%), followed by in-person exchanges (62%) and news media (43%). Other key sources of information included films/ documentaries (7%), conferences (6%) and religious sermons (1%).

The opinions in support of or against hosting public campaigns were reflective of the polarised points of view being held on the practice. For instance, an anti-khatna respondent from India (2020) said, “It needs to be more out there in public. Everybody needs to know because there are still people practising it.” A pro-khatna advocate (2020), meanwhile, said, “Not comfortable as these are not the things we should be discussing.”

- **Feelings attached to public campaigns, advocacy, and activism:**

a. On Anti-khatna campaigns

Among those who had come across anti-khatna campaigns, 53% respondents indicated that they felt understood and represented by the dialogues and debates, while 6% felt uncomfortable and hurt. Around 41% said that these campaigns made them think. Those participants who felt understood and represented indicated that these campaigns to end the practice reflected their personal beliefs, gave them the strength to share their personal experiences and reaffirmed a sense of not feeling alone. On the other hand, those who felt uncomfortable and hurt suggested that the anti-khatna campaigns made them angry, particularly the references to 'mutilation'. They also felt that it was too personal a matter to be discussed in public.

Several female respondents indicated that while the public campaigns and coverage were triggering, it was also empowering to hear so many voices.

> "It is always a triggering experience since it is so personal. As of now I am feeling angry at my parents. However, it is also empowering to participate in this conversation, and I am very glad to know about the activism work happening around it. I also feel hopeful that the generations to come will not be subject to FGC," said a female respondent opposing the practice (2020).

> "Creating dialogue is the first step to change," said a France-based anti-khatna advocate.

On the other hand, for staunch supporters of the practice, these public conversations and exchanges reportedly challenged their communal beliefs. "We are a highly educated, peace loving community. The women in our community are highly respected," said a female respondent from India (2020). "Khafz is a religious practice, in existence for more than 1400 years. It is harmless, we ladies are enjoying our lives, we are happy and we derive tremendous strength from our faith. Khafz is an integral part of our faith, raising campaigns against it hurts our basic value system and sentiments. Why are we victimised? Why can't we follow our religion? Why create inequality

between men and women? This practice is your choice, so let people like me, who believe it, practice peacefully. Live and let live." (2020)

b. On pro-khatna campaigns:

Meanwhile, among those respondents who had come across the pro-khatna campaigns, 16% respondents felt understood and heard by the campaigns, while 62% respondents felt uncomfortable and hurt. Around 22% said that the pro-khatna campaigns made them think about the practice and its politics. Those participants who felt understood and represented indicated that the campaigns defending the practice reflected their religious beliefs, protected the honour of their community women, and fostered a sense of belonging among them. On the other hand, those who felt uncomfortable and hurt suggested that the pro-khatna campaigns dismissed women's pain and trauma and challenged human and child rights. Nearly 33% respondents also indicated that the pro-khatna campaigns made unnecessary comparisons to male circumcision.

Some of the key reasons indicated for a sense of discomfort in the pro-khatna campaigns included the dismissal of women's trauma/pain (87.5%), being against human/child rights (76%) and that it did not represent their views (70.5%). In addition, around 55% respondents also indicated that the pro-khatna campaigns made unnecessary comparisons to male circumcision. Among those who indicated that the pro-khatna conversations made them feel understood and represented, the key factors (multiple answer question) ranged from protection of honour and dignity of the community women (23%) to representation of their belief systems (22%), and the religious and cultural significance of the practice (16%) to a sense of community belonging that the practice fosters (10%).

> "At this point of time, I feel that the Anti-khatna campaign is dominating the narrative which has resulted in defaming my community. Taking this survey is a small step on my part on getting

my voice heard," said a female respondent from India (2020), who strongly supports the practice.

Another respondent indicated that the anti-khatna campaigners were seeking attention.

> "I feel that all the activists who are against khafz are basically for name and fame. If they really see it as an evil they would have taken an approach to educate the female members of the community. A sincere approach of reform is the one that comes from within and not from outside," she said (2020).

However, anti-khatna activists, several of whom are also survivors, said that it was crucial to have these conversations at both personal and public spaces. A male respondent from India said:

> "I hope that this subject will again be spoken about. The reason the Bohra community did nothing about the matter, when it was raised in the media two years ago was because the Indian media didn't write a lot about it and dropped the matter, after a crust-level investigation for a few days. This needs to be spoken about, as much as we talk about domestic violence, or rape, or gender bias." (2020)

Another respondent echoed his sentiments.

> "Need of the hour is to resolve the issue by debate and not by blind faith," said the respondent from India (2020).

“I have no hard feelings towards my mum, who believed in it innocently, without realising that it was my right to know what is done to my body. I, as a mom of a girl now, have ensured my child never goes through this, and also try convincing other mums who probably are open to take advice… This is an abuse to your own kid and shouldn't be done without their consent till they are an adult. I still have horrible memories of my childhood and don't wish anyone should go through the same.”

Female, 36-45 years, Employed, Married, UAE (2020)

“It’s a completely safe practice.”

Female, 46-55 years, Married, Self-employed, India (2020)

(UN)TYING THE KNOTS

This study was born from and within the omissions and silences in the publicly waged battle against the tradition of female khatna. By situating the lived experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the community members at the centre of the discussion and deliberately expanding the gaze, we have attempted to establish the complexity in the public discourses on the practice, and the local negotiations made by them in their personal exchanges.

The very polarised nature of the exchanges on the ground, which have come through in the study, certainly pose a challenge to bridge the underlying gap and take the conversation forward. While nearly half the respondents indicated that the conversations on the practice made them feel empowered, accepted, represented, and provided them with a sense of comfort, there were 33% of respondents who associated conversations on female khatna with feelings of discomfort, judgment, fear, nervousness, and misunderstanding.

However, the study also garnered valuable insights that signal hope, strength, and direction in steering conversations on the ground, and further, to build future research enquiries. A key finding of the study was that more than 68% of the respondents suggested that conversations on the practice should be done publicly, while 21% of them were unsure. Moreover 74% of them were keen to have conversations on the practice in the future These findings reflect the willingness of the community members to respond to the ongoing campaigns and movement on the practice of khatna in the community. Some respondents in their qualitative explanations explicitly suggested that the levels of difficulty associated with speaking about the practice, particularly with family and relatives and community members, varied with time. This indicates the idea of continued conversations remain vital to speaking on the practice of female khatna and to take the taboo out of it.

Through their qualitative responses, the respondents notably trained the spotlight on the role of the mother as a key stakeholder and decision maker in carrying out the practice on their daughters. The respondents also brought to the fore the complex issues of acknowledging the love and trust relationship they shared with their mothers on the one hand, and the anxiety and distress of having been cut—and the lack of recognition of their agency-- as a child. This speaks to a larger framing of the practice beyond the idea of whether it should be carried out or not, and certainly warrants more critical investigation.

Drawing on the key findings illustrated in this study, this section gesture towards recommendations for future exchanges and engagements. These include:

- to create opportunities and mediate platforms of respectful exchange between community members with different political stances and standpoints on the practice of female khatna
- to build safe and secure platforms for community members to share and exchange experiences, ideas and feelings related to FGC/M,
- to include community men to participate in conversations and discussions on the practice of female khatna,
- to collaborate and build information and communication materials relevant to the practice, and steer sensitive dialogue on the usage and politics of the word ‘mutilation’,
- to sensitise key stakeholders such as the media, lawyers, teachers, and activists to speak about and disseminate public information on FGC/M in a well-researched and thoughtful manner.

In conclusion, this research study trains the spotlight on the existing polarised factions within the community on speaking about the practice of female khatna, both, in private and public realms.

By linking the personal with the political, the study further gestures towards the need and the underlying challenges to mediate sensitive, inclusive, well-researched and collaborative exchanges on the practice of female khatna and its politics.

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