SURVIVING THE CUT. THEN LEADING THE FIGHT AGAINST IT.

By Stefania Lugli

Trigger Warning: this article contains detailed accounts of female genital mutilation, please be advised.

Mariya Taher considers herself a survivor.

Her family used to fly to India from California every other year to visit relatives. One summer, when she was seven years old, she visited a stranger's apartment in India with her mother and aunt. Inside, her dress was lifted, her underwear was pulled down, and she felt a sharp sensation on her genitals.

Taher was cut. She is a survivor of female genital cutting (FGC), commonly referred to as female genital mutilation.

"Mutilation has a connotation of intent of harm," Taher, 36, says in an interview, sitting in a cramped cafe in Cambridge years after her experience. "People aren't intending to harm. It was what was called a social norm so it was justified." She adds that while she tends to use FGC as a neutralizing term, she repeats what ever term the community she's working with uses.

"It was something I grew up with. It was normal. I never questioned it," Taher says.

FGC, a practice defined by the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non medical or traditional reasons, is an act of gender-based violence with a global prevalence in every continent. The act is classified into four major types, including lacerations to the clitorius, the labia minoria, the sealing of the vaginal opening, and all other harmful procedures (pricking, piercing, cauterizing, etc).

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates around 200 million girls and women have been or will be subjected to forms of FGC, with another estimated three million girls at risk of undergoing the practice every year.

"When you research it, you get these certain figures, but you don't really recognize how prevalent it is," Taher says. "That data only includes thirty countries around the world. There's probably a much higher number. It's an underrepresentation."

For example: Taher, born in the United States, is not counted within the WHO's estimation.

FGC, a manifestation of gender inequality, has been defended with claims of perceived social benefit, such as a boost in femininity, neutralizing a woman's sexuality, or as a form of religious upkeep. While no documented evidence of the Quran, Bible, or Torah permitting or endorsing FGC exists, many religious leaders and followers defend the act as a form of allowed religious maintenance. The defense of religion then gets exploited, leaving women who have the option to opt out of the practice refuse to out of fear of stigmatization and community rejection.

For Taher's family, it was the religious thing to do. She grew up in a small Islamic sect named Dwaoodi Bohra based out of Mumbai, India. This Muslim community includes roughly two million followers worldwide.

"It's a very small minority community," Taher says. She referenced a 2017 case when a U.S. doctor, also from the Dawoodi Bohra community, was discovered to be secretly performing

"The U.S. case just really shows that [FGC] is a global issue," she says. "The kids that it was happening to were born here. There's all these misconceptions that are being broken."

After growing up into the realization that she was violated, and indeed, a survivor, she turned to storytelling as an outlet for advocacy. She is considered an expert on FGC, has been awarded several accolades, and currently works with the Massachusetts Women's Bar Association (MWBA) to legally criminalize FGC within the state.

Taher also co-founded a nonprofit with four other women one of them also a survivor of FGC, to engage communities on the practice. The organization, named Sahiyo, strives to empower Asian communities to end FGC and create positive social change through dialogue and collaboration, according to the website's mission.

"We use storytelling methods to bring dialogue and discussion to communities. Our definition of storytelling is pretty broad," Taher says. Amongst the founders are a writer, a journalist, and two documentarians.

Part of the difficulty of eradicating FGC, as Taher states, is how deeply entrenched the practice is in tradition.

"Some people don't want to be identified as a victim. The fact is, generally it's happening to young girls who aren't old enough to consent and have no idea what is happening to them," Taher says. "In any other context, removing genitalia would be considered child abuse. Some [girls] are very traumatized by it, some are not. There's a range of psychological, emotional, and physical consequences to it."

Survivorship may feel like wearing a target on one's back, trying to retreat from trauma while also weighted by the stigma attached to it. Taher, despite following every instinct to remain respectful to her childhood community, has suffered the consequences of being an outspoken survivor.

"My family gets affected by it. My parents are part of the [Dwaoodi Bohra] community, and so they've gotten talked to and taunted and things like that," Taher says. "'There might be trouble for you because of the things your daughter is doing...' I've heard other things with relatives that they've been warned and things like that. That pisses me off."

Besides the threats, a campaign opposing Taher and the nonprofit Sahiyo's advocacy has emerged on Instagram. Dawoodi Bohra Women for Religious Freedom (DBWRF) operate an active social media presence, using sophisticated graphics to resist against the idea of FGC harming girls and women. One post, showing a line drawing of a Muslim woman, has #SahiyoIsNotMyVoice scribbled underneath the feet.

Taher glanced downwards towards the table when discussing DBWRF. Her frustration, shown by furrowed eyebrows, was obvious. Her cousin, a close childhood friend, was a fol-

FGC on young girls in Michigan.

lower of the organization and hasn't spoken to Taher in years.

"For me, it's a little bit of human nature. No one wants to be seen as a monster. I think that's what it is. A lot of people are like, 'Well, it didn't harm me, so how could it be wrong? You're making it out to seem like it's this terrible thing but you're lying,'" Taher says.

The Dawoodi Bohra sect practice the least severe form of FGC, according to Taher. "A lot of the opposition is distinguishing between it. A lot of [supporters of FGC] are saying 'Oh the most severe form … that's mutilation. That shouldn't be done. But what we're doing is fine, it's not harmful."

Taher said she believes the distortion of reality is a commonality in gendered violence, referencing both the #MeToo era and the Judge Brett Kavanaugh trial last year. However, survivors can not be pushed into a situation where they could feel uncomfortable and then refuse to share their stories. Taher encourages the survivors she encounters to think about the consequences of FGC.

"That's when social norms change. When people start realizing. Allow survivors to tell their stories, but in a way that gives them agency," Taher says.

But, flipping of the issue continues. Taher has been accused of ruining the reputation of the Dawoodi Bohra community, with members angered at the idea that they would ever deliberately harm their own children by FGC.

"There are times where I'm like, 'Why am I doing this?' and I think, 'Is it worth it? Is it not?' I have self-doubt. Yeah it's hard. At times I can't really separate from that because I do have this personal connection," Taher says.

Her hesitation has not prevented her from testifying. Taher continues to work closely with the MWBA as the association prioritizes the criminalization of FGC. A FGC bill was presented in January for the third consecutive legislative session in a row, after failing to move into a floor vote twice before.

At a legislative breakfast hosted by MWBA, Marian Ryan, the Middlesex District Attorney, spoke before a crowd of state senate interns and city attorneys.

"All of us here get a little bit uncomfortable when we start talking about the actual details of what happens," Ryan says.

The bill states that offenders, including those who commit FGM on a child or takes a child outside the state to commit FGM, face a punishment of a maximum fine of $10,000 and a maximum sentence of ten years in state prison.

Other guidelines of the bill include the administration of an educational program for prevention and outreach in communities with FGM prevalence, training medical professionals to recognize FGM risk factors or signs of a victim, and allowing an individual to pursue civil action 10 years after the plaintiff turns 18.

"There are 14,591 women in the state who either have had this practice committed on them or are at risk of having it committed," Ryan said in her speech. "The majority of them don't live in some place far away. They live in two towns in my district: Cambridge and Newton. And in Boston."

For Taher, it is a small step forward for eradicating FGC. When prompted what eradication is defined as to her, she spoke firmly.

"It means ending all forms, regardless of type. Or the cut. Or the extensiveness."

At least 200 million girls and women are walking as survivors. Mariya is bold enough to eliminate what made her one.