



Supporting Healing Inside and Out: Dermatologist-Led Skin and Hair Care Empowerment for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence

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Citation: Sally R, Lakdawala N, Lee N, Lo Sicco K, Pomeranz MK. Supporting Healing Inside and Out: Dermatologist-Led Skin and Hair Care Empowerment for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence. *Dermatol Pract Concept*. 2023;13(3):e2023138.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5826/dpc.1303a138>

Accepted: January 4, 2023; **Published:** July 2023

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Funding: None.

Competing interests: None.

Authorship: All authors have contributed significantly to this publication.

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The global burden of gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant public health concern, with one in three women estimated to experience some form of GBV throughout their lifetime regardless of racial, socio-economic, or religious background [1]. It has been well-established that experiencing GBV can have devastating consequences on mental and physical health as well as overall quality of life [2]. Compounded with this, many women with a history of trauma experience homelessness as they navigate escape and recovery and encounter numerous barriers to accessing medical attention crucial for dermatologic health [2]. Furthermore, low self-esteem and persistent stress may decrease adoption of self-care routines [3]. One core theme that emerges when studying healing from GBV is improvement of self-image and empowerment of health and self-care [2]. There is a pressing need for interventions that support such healing for survivors across all fields of medicine, including dermatology.

Our group developed the Skincare Empowerment and Education with Dermatologists (SEEDs) initiative in the

hopes of promoting female dermatologic knowledge in a vulnerable population, thus boosting their self-esteem and aiding in their recovery. There exists precedent for this type of dermatological education effort, including a program at the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP) [3]. Our partner in this initiative was Womankind, which is a New York City-based community organization and shelter serving survivors of gender-based violence with a focus on communities of color.

The SEEDs meeting was held in a private, safe, nonclinical setting and hosted by people who identify as women to bolster feelings of emotional and physical safety. Twenty-four women from Womankind community attended. Fundraising efforts allowed participants to take free private car transportation to further enhance feelings of security. Educational topics focused on photoprotection in skin of color, vulvar dermatology, skin changes in pregnancy, acne, and alopecia and were presented by board-certified dermatologists. Over an hour was set aside for question-and-answer sessions.

Product donations organized during the month prior allowed all participants to take home high-quality skin care kits.

The aim of SEEDs was to promote wellness and self-care through skin and hair care understanding, and feedback from our attendees suggests outcomes in line with this goal. Twenty of the participants informally expressed that they would like to attend more events of this type and felt the event was overall a positive experience. Three participants said it allowed them to pose questions they “had never been able to ask an actual doctor before.” We believe that encouraging an open forum has an additional benefit of promoting medical engagement and trust in dermatologists. However, our presentations were given in English, which may have limited participation and understanding, and we did not administer formal survey instruments, which limits definitive conclusions on the impact of the event. We hope to establish a sustainable platform for dermatologists to serve our community through recurring educational events. Further, we hope to encourage other dermatologists to pursue creative and culturally competent ways of connecting with their

communities and working with underserved populations, in particular, women of color and survivors of GBV.

References

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