

1 Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (in the following: FGM) involves the partial or total removal of female genitalia and the resulting damage to the female genital organs. The great majority of women in Burkina Faso have undergone FGM (75,8%, see: DHS 2010, chapter 3.2, and chapter 3.3), although the international community criticises that this practice violates numerous universal human rights concepts: e.g. the right to health, to freedom from torture or cruel or degrading treatment, and, in some cases, the right to life (see chapter 2.4). In contrast to this widespread notion of individual human rights, however, lies the basic conviction that cultures define their own values, beliefs, and ethics (refer to chapter 2.5).

How can one balance the relation between the right to physical integrity and the right to preserve cultural traditions? And how is it possible to counteract FGM while both respecting traditional values and codes of behaviour and encouraging Burkinabé in remote villages to develop a critical look at this ancient tradition? This study emphasises the need to comprehend and acknowledge the motivations of those who continue the practice, while also developing a promising approach for stimulating locals in Burkina Faso to rethink their own perceptions regarding FGM.

During the preparatory work of this study, the focus was put on the question of how to tackle FGM in Burkina Faso while taking Human Rights Education (HRE) into account. HRE aims at developing the ability to appreciate one's own rights in order to be able to advocate the rights of others. HRE means more than the provision of information on human rights. Instead, it encompasses a long process by which people learn to respect the dignity of others and the significance and methods of ensuring that respect within a democratic society (refer to chapter 4). However, the analysis of this research study will demonstrate that the premises of HRE are not applicable to today's Burkinabé community. Findings of this study provide strong arguments that learning to appreciate one's own rights and the rights of others are not sufficient for reaching a cessation of the custom of FGM in Burkina Faso. It is elaborated that HRE especially reflects a Western notion of human rights, putting a great emphasis on individual needs and rights. This research finds that concentrating on the encouragement of individual human rights is not suitable for the traditional context of Burkina Faso, where the locals attach greater value to

community rights than to individual rights (refer to chapter 12.2). The human rights discourse is the foundation for international researchers and activists to take a clear position against FGM: It will be depicted in chapter 2.4 that international human rights documents provide strong arguments for the abolition of the practice. Nevertheless, the outcomes of this study will show that although international human rights treaties and thought structures might deliver strong arguments against FGM, this does not automatically mean they provide socially and culturally acceptable tools of how to engage and act in opposition of FGM.

The aim of this study is to develop and critically reflect on a strategy that combats FGM while including local thought structures and traditional logics of the local communities in Burkina Faso. The study describes the application of a particular cinematic awareness-raising instrument: *ciné débat*. Native social workers travel with educational films to remote villages in order to discuss social and health topics. The goal of these *ciné débats* is to motivate the attendees to share viewpoints, experiences, and concerns with the group during debates, instead of merely being presented with prefabricated opinions (see chapter 5). The study investigates if and to what extent *ciné débat* could be a promising tool for sensitising people in Burkina Faso. Also, making and presenting a film as a substitute for books and written pamphlets might be useful in tackling FGM in Burkina Faso: the vast majority of the Burkinabé public is illiterate. In Kongoussi, the research area of this study, an estimated 98% of the inhabitants cannot read or write (Deutsche Welthungerhilfe, 2013).

Thus, this research does not only theoretically analyse the potentials and challenges of this inventive tool, but it also describes how a documentary film on FGM in Burkina Faso, *L'excision, un thème pour tout le monde*,¹ was produced and presented in collaboration with local partners. It needs to be made clear that the film as a first version was produced as a main part of my master's thesis. The present study, including the practical work with the film, is based on the findings of this master's thesis. The goal of the film production was that the people involved would be enabled not only to form their own opinions on the custom, but also to publicly share their thoughts with the other attendees during the *ciné débats*. This research aims to use film as a tool for finding solutions in the traditional context of the country, not to dictate or instruct behaviour patterns to the locals. It is believed that the critical reconsideration of one's own thoughts represents a prerequisite for changing habits. That implies that only if people are willing to discuss and maybe even change

¹ English translation of the title is: 'FGM, a topic that involves everyone'.

their own convictions can a progressive change of habits be possible. In this context, the expectations of women in Burkina Faso and the importance of complying with traditional gender roles will be depicted. Because the practice is based on a long tradition, it is assumed that any intervention against FGM has to involve the perceptions and convictions of those approached. Adapted to local viewing habits and to the unique perception of cinema in the country, this study aims to explore whether and, if so, how to use documentary film as a means of tackling FGM in rural Burkina Faso. Hence, the aim of this study is not primarily to decrease the percentage of excised women. Instead, the focus is put on the following: a) the local socio-cultural context of Burkina Faso, including a discourse on community and gender; b) the production process of the film; c) the film's presentation before audiences in the five villages; and d) the potential impact of the documentary *L'excision, un thème pour tout le monde* when used for awareness-raising actions against FGM in Burkina Faso, and the resulting lessons learned.

This explorative study is empirically oriented and based on two pillars: theoretical analysis and practical experiments with the film production and film presentation. The study was conducted with qualitative methods, including a manifold triangulation (refer to chapter 6.2.2), which resulted in different perspectives being integrated into the research process. This research also included face-to-face interviews with experts discussing FGM and the social system of Burkina Faso, the role of women, and the possibilities and difficulties of *ciné débats* (refer to chapter 10). In the frame of *ciné débats*, this research also describes why and to what extent traditional communication tools of Burkina Faso (*joking relationships* and *palaver*, see chapter 5.3.1 and 5.3.2) are an essential part of the film's production and the implementation of the subsequent presentation in the villages. The final film presentations (in the form of *ciné débats*) and the subsequent outcomes of the study primarily focus on the geographical Bam region in the north of Burkina Faso, concentrating on five villages near Kongoussi (Kougsabla, Nanné, Rissiam, Sanghro, and Zoura). Each of these five villages involved in this study had earlier been approached by other awareness-raising campaigns relating to FGM (refer to chapter 3.1.2). It would not be possible to measure the direct impact of the five *ciné débats* on the incidence of FGM in the region, because the intervention in the frame of this study cannot be considered independently of all the other projects against FGM that have been implemented in the research area. Instead, the main goal of the study is to understand the complex thought structures of local communities concerning FGM, and to observe how to achieve a critical reflection on the subject while aiming to break down established structures. The study exam-

ines how audiences critically reflect on the topic of FGM, and how men and women become involved in a debate on traditions and customs. Also, the study investigates how defenders of the practice can be encouraged to speak openly about their opinions on FGM.

Although this study is results-oriented and permits rich and fruitful outcomes, the conclusions reported in this research may not be generally applicable and cannot be generalised to other research areas. This scientific work endeavours to correspond to the reality of local Burkinabé and tackles three inter-related research questions:

1. *How can a documentary on FGM be produced that is attuned to the socio-cultural context of Burkina Faso?*

The first research question demands the exploration of the social background of the country. What needs to be considered in order to engage against FGM in Burkina Faso? As FGM mainly involves a violation of basic women's rights, it is of utmost importance to understand the role and the acceptance of women in the research area. In addition, the socio-cultural specificities of Burkina Faso must be analysed. During the analysis one focus will be made on the influence and significance of the perception of 'community' in the country.

This research question also involves the history and significance of film in Burkina Faso. It is necessary to understand the local structures and preconditions of film projects, as well as to comprehend its central social components for the communities of Burkina Faso. The study critically analyses the tool *ciné débat* and relates it to traditional communication habits (*joking relationships* and *palaver*). It also examines the application of *ciné débat* in the geographical area of the research, with its specific adaption to the needs and expectations of the target group.

Particular attention is paid to the methodological approach of this study. The approach of Participatory Action Research (PAR) allows a continuous reflection on the research procedure, and includes the simultaneous adaptation of the findings to the local reality and the elaboration of the study. Preconditions of the actual research design and theoretical foundations will also be summarised.

2. *How can locals best be approached with the film? What are the socio-cultural conditions in Burkina Faso?*

The second research question tackles the possible discrepancy of universal values and local customs. Is there a striking discrepancy between 'universal human rights concepts' regarding the significance to preserve

the physical integrity of the female body, and the traditional perception of human rights in Burkina Faso as a basis for peaceful cohabitation?

While FGM is a serious violation of human rights, the practice still continues due to traditional belief structures. This research question puts a special focus on how to approach locals with the documentary *L'excision, un thème pour tout le monde*. In addition, the collaboration with local partners (RESEAU,² AFD,³ and local *clubs d'écoutes*)⁴ will be critically analysed. They give insight into the methodology used to examine the film presentation. Central components of the rural and traditional structures in Burkina Faso must be defined and analysed, with the wider objective of making the film applicable for local citizens. In this regard, special attention is drawn to the traditional anchoring of FGM in Burkina Faso. With the help of expert interviews and literature research, the decisive role of community, as well as the importance of family units within society, must also be critically analysed.

3. *How is the film received in the five rural communities studied? Is this form of awareness-raising promising for engagements against FGM?*

The answer to this question requires a critical reflection of the research process and includes an evaluation of different actors' chains of thought. The question concentrates on the analysis of both the perception and the acceptance of the film in the context of each of the five villages where the film was presented: Kougsabla, Nanné, Rissiam, Sanghro, and Zoura. Here, especially the topics that aroused attention in the audiences must be represented and evaluated. This question addresses the perception of women in Burkinabé society and will critically observe traditional gender roles in the country. Interviews with the moderators of the film, with representatives of the *Association Féminine Song-Manegré* (AFD), and with local *clubs d'écoutes* give insight into the structures of thought within local communities as well as their main topics of interest. With its numerous qualitative research tools, this study focuses on how the locals react to the documentary in order to conclude with recommendations of how to

² RESEAU is an abbreviation for *RESEAU pour le développement socio économique et social du Burkina Faso*. This state-recognised NGO was founded in 1998 in the region Niou/ East Burkina Faso.

³ AFD is an abbreviation for *Association Féminine Song-Manegré*. The organisation was founded in Nanné (in the Bam region), the birthplace of its president Mrs. Claire Gybére.

⁴ A short description of local project partners is given on p. 15.

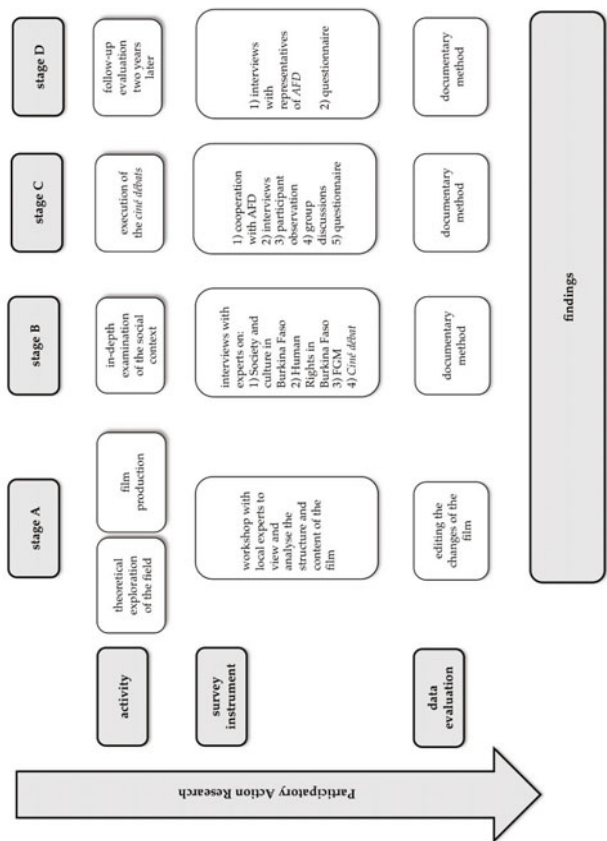
approach the topic of FGM within this complex social structure in the future.

Procedure of the research

The following figure visualises the design of this research and depicts the four stages of the study (A-D). The activity of each stage is divided into two parts: explanations of the *survey instrument* and information on the method of *data evaluation*. The arrow on the left side of the figure demonstrates that the entire research was conducted through PAR, with its basic functions of 'action' and 'reflection' (refer to chapter 6).

It is essential to combine theoretical-scientific approaches with state-of-the-art tools against FGM used in Burkina Faso by local and international organisations. This research is using *ciné débat* as a methodological tool for awareness-raising on FGM in Burkina Faso.

Figure 1: Procedure of the research



Source: own diagram

Stage A was focused on the exploration of the research field. It contains a theoretical outline of the research topic (including a representation of the historical and social insights of FGM in Burkina Faso, a debate on cultural relativism, and a reflection on traditional discussion tools in the country with a focus on *ciné débat*). This stage broadened the understanding for the unique structure of society in Burkina Faso and for its local values and communication tools (*joking relationships* and *palaver*).

Stage A also consisted of the making of the film. Here, multiple survey instruments were implemented. Each step of the filmmaking process was analysed and specified (refer to chapter 7, 8, and 9). After the film was completed, local experts were invited to reflect on how it could best be adapted for reception amongst Burkinabé. The film is a product of cooperation between the local NGO RESEAU and myself, and was critically evaluated during a workshop in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso by nineteen participants of nine local NGOs. The content and structure of the film was discussed in working groups after a screening of the film. Numerous aspects of how the film could be improved in order to attain the goal of stimulating discussions on FGM in rural areas were discussed. Furthermore, discussions on the content led to the necessity of changing some aspects of the film (refer to chapter 7.5.2).

After the monitoring and reviewing process, numerous changes of the film had to be made. It was necessary to re-edit the film in order to make it more acceptable for future viewers.

After the re-editing of the film, the activity of stage B focused on an in-depth evaluation of the social context. The film deliberately did not include experts on the topics of women's rights, film, or *ciné débat* in order to better portray the opinions of villagers in Burkina Faso. The goal was to let locals speak about the topic, not to present experts that share their theoretical and academic knowledge. Stage B therefore intends to accomplish an in-depth understanding of the social context of Burkina Faso. It raises questions of society and culture, of the perception of human rights and FGM in Burkina Faso, as well as of the cinematic awareness-raising tool *ciné débat*. In order to attain a vast understanding of the complex social structure of the country and its specific preconditions for sensitisation activities, it was essential to acquire knowledge from experts. Results taken from these interviews can be found in chapter 12., 13., 14., 15., and 16. Their findings enable central conclusions in terms of what needs to be considered before engaging against FGM in Burkina Faso, especially regarding the significant role of the community for any change process and the importance of acting according to the local gender perceptions.

Stage C involved the actual film presentation in the five villages of Burkina Faso. After the film was re-edited, the goal was to observe its outcome and its usefulness for the stimulation of discussions on FGM. In cooperation with the local NGO AFD, five presentations of the film were organised in March 2011 as *ciné débats*. The debriefing sessions with the AFD team after each *ciné débat* were also recorded and evaluated. The main objective was to observe and analyse the following:

- How the AFD team guided the discussions;
- What kinds of topics were raised within the groups;
- Lessons learned from this explorative and empirical research.

Stage D describes a follow-up process of the research, which was accomplished two years after the execution of the *ciné débats*. I returned to the research area and conducted a final interview with two representatives of the AFD, obtaining information on how the project had evolved since its implementation in the region of Kongoussi. Through a questionnaire that I handed out to the local *clubs d'écoutes*, further information on the audiences' perception of the film was obtained.

The findings of these research stages were sorted out through the documentary method and opened up insights that form a basis for possible future research projects. In the following, a short outline of this study will be given.

Part one (stage A):	Theoretical background
Part two (stage A):	Methodology
Part three (stage B):	Results from the in-depth analysis of the social context (expert interviews)
Part four (stage C&D):	Results from the execution of the <i>ciné débats</i>
Part five:	Summary and conclusions

Part one: Theoretical background

The study begins by discussing central aspects of the practice of FGM in general and in Burkina Faso (refer to chapter 2 and 3), as well as highlighting the socio-economic conditions of the geographical area of research (refer to chapter 3.1). The theoretical background of this study also contains a critical evaluation of the scientific literature currently available relating to the tension between cultural rights and universalism regarding FGM (refer to chapter 2.5).

In the frame of human rights, the government of Burkina Faso has ratified numerous treaties that explicitly outlaw FGM (refer to chapter 3.5.1), yet no relevant decrease in the prevalence of excised women can be noted. This present study shows that despite the legal measures taken by the state, FGM remains a major issue in the country. It becomes obvious that imposing human rights concepts on Burkinabé with a top-down approach directed by the states through laws and conventions has not achieved the desired effect. Therefore, this study recommends corresponding to local communication habits and to match awareness-raising methods to the cultural reality of the countryside of Burkina Faso. The approach of *ciné débat*, which is directed to the local people themselves and consequently follows a bottom-up strategy, is introduced (refer to chapter 5). In subsequent parts, this study critically analyses and evaluates the usefulness of this tool, and how the local communities receive this approach.

Part two: Methodology

Through the application of PAR, this research was conducted in a multi-staged process (refer to chapter 6). This study is based on extensive qualitative data: interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, and group discussions. Because of the detailed and multi-step research procedure, the methodology part of this study is necessarily very detailed and elaborated.

The study involved different actors in the planning and the pursuing of the action. It remained flexible and responsive to situations and people in order to be able to change strategies and adjust them to the local reality. The study was conducted to be with the people and for the people, so as to directly apply to the challenges in the local community. Applying the PAR approach was an attempt to achieve understanding and change at the same time. The approach centres and reflects on the experiences of the people that are directly affected by FGM. Using PAR helped to adapt to the cultural reality of Burkina Faso, as it takes the locals and their interests seriously. The goal was to do research *with* the locals, not merely *on* them (refer to chapter 6.1). In order to attain this objective, it was essential to continuously and critically reflect on the research procedure and to, if necessary, adapt it to the reality found on the ground. Any accomplished action was always followed by critical reflection, putting questions like: 'What worked? What have we learned?' onto the agenda. Likewise, this reflection was always followed by an adapted action.

Human Rights Education Through Ciné Débat
Film as a Tool to Fight Against Female Genital Mutilation
in Burkina Faso

Richter, J.

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