

Empowering the next generations to abandon female genital mutilation (FGM)

Integrating the topic FGM into school education in Burkina Faso

Context

“At school we learned that female circumcision can bring death and disease. When I am an adult, I will never agree to the circumcision of my daughters.”

A female primary school pupil, Batié, Burkina Faso

Female genital mutilation (FGM) constitutes a major violation of fundamental human rights and can cause serious harm to the physical and psychological health of its victims. Consequently, Burkina Faso has ratified several international conventions condemning FGM, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa.

Since 1996, FGM has been prohibited and is punishable by law in Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, it remains entrenched across a large part of society as the proportion of mutilated women of reproductive age demonstrates: 76 % of women aged 15 to 49 years are circumcised. However, in view of the next generation, an encouraging trend is emerging in recent years: while in 2003 20 % of girls less than 10 years were circumcised; in 2010 this

was true of only 13 % of girls aged 0 to 14 years. Since FGM is mainly performed on young girls, this indicates a general decline of the practice in Burkina Faso.

The role of education in the abandonment of FGM

The cultural identity of many women is based on the practice of FGM. A change in attitude towards the practice and the adjustment of cultural values are therefore indispensable in overcoming FGM, and education plays an important role within this process. In this approach school teachers facilitate a process of reflection that enables boys and girls to question harmful traditional practices, leading to discussion about their gender roles at home and in society. This cognitive process allows students, and especially girls to realize their right to health and physical integrity, and to identify harmful traditional practices such as FGM.

A long-term approach grounded in the education system can therefore lead to noticeable social change, for example, if a majority of women refuse to allow the circumcision of their daughters or if a majority of men are willing to marry an uncircumcised woman.





Teaching anatomical knowledge – a basis for understanding FGM

In Burkina Faso, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), supports the integration of FGM as a topic within the school education system: as a result a pilot approach was implemented in the country by the “Sexual Health and Human Rights Program” (PROSAD) in close collaboration with the supra-regional project “Ending Female Genital Mutilation” and partner institutions in charge of education.

The school – an ideal place for preventing FGM

In beneficiary schools FGM education takes place simultaneously across several subjects – for example in natural sciences, philosophy and French. The continuous exposure to key messages related to FGM and the debates stimulated over several years in discussions at elementary and secondary school level enables the children to gather information, to make judgments and to form their own opinions.

The approach involves communicative and participatory learning techniques, as well as innovative teaching methods such as ‘problem solving’ and ‘clarification of values’ as illustrated in the following description of a typical course:

Batié, Burkina Faso, during FGM classes

We are in a class of 5th and 6th year students in primary school. 42 girls and 34 boys aged 12 to 14 years are present. The teacher asks the children to explain what the circumcision of girls is and who performs it, and to name the respective advantages and disadvantages. He notes without comment all answers on the blackboard. Then he asks the children to form two groups. Those for and those against the practice are grouped facing each other in the room. 29 students are in favor and 47 are against the practice. The teacher invites the two groups to compile their arguments for the debate. Now the groups have to change roles and listen to the other point of view. Those for the practice cite for example that a circumcised girl is beautiful and pure. Those who are against respond that circumcision is very painful and sometimes fatal. The teacher notes the arguments.

At the end of the debate, the teacher speaks for the first time. He gives his opinion by using the arguments of his students with which he agrees. Again he asks the children to divide into two groups in favor or against the custom. There are still supporters, both girls and boys, who defend circumcision, but the group has decreased by two thirds.



Success factors

In Burkina Faso, there is strong political will to eradicate FGM deriving from the commitment of the head of state and the first lady who spoke out publicly for the abandonment of FGM. This political will has been transformed into action through dedicated and competent institutional structures at different levels.

In the area of secondary and superior education, the National Directorate of Education of the Population (EmP) has played a decisive role as its staff have considerable expertise concerning project management, including planning, implementation, and evaluation.

At school level, high quality educational materials inspire the teachers and facilitate both the students' motivation to learn and their acquisition of knowledge. They are designed to improve the memorization of key messages and are also appropriate for self-study.

Quote from a teacher:

"The class is more alive, students express themselves more freely to defend their position."

To reach girls and boys outside the school system, it is also necessary to supplement formal education through educational activities at the community level. This involves using methods of communication and exchange which encourage the older generations to enter into a dialogue on FGM with young people.

The results

The informational and educational approach which was implemented with the support of PROSAD has contributed to the decrease of the practice in the two intervention regions in the East and South-West of the country, according to study results. The positive experiences led in 2009 to the inclusion of the approach as one of eight strategic axes into the National Action Plan for Zero Tolerance versus FGM. Increasingly, more and more people are aware of the harmful consequences of FGM and reject the custom; the majority of students are sensitized on the issue

and proudly share their new knowledge with the community. Since the students' families are also involved in the process of communication and exchange, the approach stimulates a process of attitude change in the wider social environment outside of school. Furthermore, young people who have decided to abandon the practice of FGM can report cases to teachers or to the toll free and anonymous number of the National Committee for the Fight against the Practice of Circumcision (CNLPE). They become both agents of change and defendants of their rights. Finally, trained staff within the education system is also transformed into an important pillar in the fight for the abandonment of FGM even outside of school:

Quote from a teacher:

"I have contributed to the fight against the custom of female circumcision through the students in the village and through the children in my family."

These efforts are reflected in impressive statistics, for example surveys of the 2008/9 school year among students who were beneficiaries of the program:

80% of surveyed primary school students and 99% of secondary school students speak out against FGM and can name three immediate and two long-term harmful consequences.

86% of surveyed primary school students and 97% of secondary school students affirm that they will not let their daughters undergo FGM.

The integration of FGM as a topic in formal lessons in Burkina Faso is the result of a long process of collaboration. National policy officially recognized the approach in 2009. The ministries in charge of primary and secondary education authorized the integration of FGM education in all schools where teachers were specifically trained with the material designed for the approach. The number of schools offering FGM education of a high quality increases continuously, as does the number of trained teachers. As a result, the current political environment is sufficiently conducive that it may soon be possible to offer all students in Burkina Faso the opportunity to learn about the harmful consequences of FGM.





Learning with adapted didactic material in a participatory manner

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Overview of the implementation process

2000: The GIZ supra-regional project “Abandonment of FGM” begins to support the integration of FGM as a topic in the curriculum of primary and secondary education in Burkina Faso: Base line survey; selection of schools for the pilot phase; preparation of training modules and didactic materials by multidisciplinary teams from the Ministry of Higher Education (MESS) in charge of EmP; and sensitization of parents from pilot schools by inspectors and pedagogic advisers from regional educational services.

2001 – 2003: Training of teachers: familiarization with materials and training to communicate with students on a sensitive topic which is taboo in society; experimental approach in selected institutions; and evaluation of the pilot phase.

2003: Decision of the two Ministries of Education to extend the integration of the topic into the classes of all schools with trained teachers.

2004: Expansion of the FGM educational approach; and provision of modules developed and tested in primary and secondary schools.

2006: Extension of FGM education to other institutions, partly financed by PLAN Germany, and supported by the Permanent Secretariat of the CNLPE. The conjointly approved approaches are taken into account as a strategic axis in the National Plan of the CNLPE for 2009 – 2013 and are thus included within the national policy.

2007 – 2009: Revision of modules and pedagogic/didactic material; refreshment of knowledge and skills of trainers at national level; identification of FGM as an emerging theme to be included in the revision of national curricula.

2010 – present: Training of trainers in vocational schools; training of regional teams of trainers at national level to facilitate the scaling up of the approach; the approach is regularly followed up by national and regional team missions and through surveys and routine data collection; the World Bank supports the approach in two other regions of Burkina Faso.



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