

# Knowing Yourself and Your Audience: Programming a Human Rights Film Festival

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Before programming a film festival, you need to know your main objective. The festival's actual programme is a reflection of what you want to achieve with your event.

Very often the goal of human rights film festivals is to contribute to public debate on human rights and to encourage people to support them. Still, finding answers to some specific questions might help you more clearly identify your aim.

Such questions include: Do you want to target specific problems and reveal issues related to your setting? Do you want to inform audiences about current affairs around the world in order to engage them in what is happening in far away places? Or do you want to attract people to the documentary film genre?

Other important questions need to be raised as well, such as what are the central topics that you want to address with your festival, *whom do your*

*chosen topics address?* Do they involve fragile or minority groups such as women, LGBT, migrants, displaced populations, or war survivors, who are often affected by serious human rights violations? Do they impact poor, less educated people from your community who never go to the movies? Does your festival address middle class, university educated people and/or local politicians? Are you reaching out to a specific group that can be referred to as a *new audience?*

Many times, the human rights film festival audience is a mix of various segments. You may have academics, activists, students and people who have been victims of human rights violations, all coming together for your event. The festival's programming should take this into consideration and appeal to the interest of a larger audience.

Programming for your festival should be purposeful, not random. It is important to nail down topics and themes before you begin looking for films. The *topics you want to highlight and communicate are actually what makes a human rights festival*, not the films themselves. The film is a piece of art that reveals its meaning in the context into which it is placed.

## Basic Topics

The reasons for launching a human rights film festival vary depending on the country or region and political or social situation. These reasons can range from a *lack of alternative information* available from outside the country through official media to a *need to reveal hidden problems* in society, such as past traumas, or inequality of rights. Here are some examples of the reasons behind several different human rights film festivals:

*Manya Human Rights International Film Festival* (Uganda): “The festival is aimed at bringing to life human rights abuses through storytelling using film, social media and art that confronts each human being to understand and demand fairness for all people as well share a platform for social dialogue. Based on our poor reading culture, film is such a powerful tool that can reach masses easily. Therefore, the aim is to use film language to raise awareness about human rights by bringing both local and international films about human rights issues to disadvantaged and disenfranchised communities in Uganda”.

*Memoria Verdad Justicia* (Guatemala): “Guatemala is a post-war country. 250,000 people died during the civil war. 45,000 people are still missing. Guatemalan genocide is called the Latin American Holocaust. Decades of repression, silence and fear marked the society and destroyed social and human relationships. After the peace treaty of 1996, few things

changed. Actually, impunity, daily violence and human rights violations are the legacy of this long period. People could never express their opinions, and the press was silenced, censored or exiled. There were few art movements, and independent cinema didn’t exist. It was from the beginning of the 1990s that a few filmmakers started again, in small circles, but with no support and still with fear. Continuous efforts allowed them to produce and screen documentaries about history and social injustice. We realised that the people were *hungry* to see themselves reflected in moving images and historical films about history. It was not until 2010 when the documentary *La Isla* (IDFA 2009) opened a massive space for these kind of films, and provided a reason for starting the human rights and documentary film festival *Muestra de Cine Internacional Memoria Verdad Justicia*. The festival’s objectives are to encourage society to see different films, create consciousness and foster a critical view on reality—to help audiences learn more about human rights and civic and democratic participation, learn from history, and allow them to express themselves. We also want the young people to get interested in making films themselves”.

*FLASHPOINT Human Rights Film Festival* (India): “Flashpoint intends to be a catalyst for social change by igniting thoughts and views around critical human rights issues. Through film screenings, panel discussions and filmmaker interactions, the festival spotlights global human rights concerns and holds a candle to similar issues existing within our own societies.



Director of Manyá HRIFF in Uganda (in black suit) with local filmmakers. Photo by Kiiza Brian.

It attempts to create better understanding and enable an environment for greater social equity. It urges its audience to act as “flash pointers” to spread awareness and create social change in their own small ways”.

*FiSahara* (Western Sahara): “FiSahara was created to address the need of Sahrawi people to access entertainment and culture, become familiar with film as a human rights educational/outreach tool, tell their own stories through film and raise international awareness about their invisible conflict. FiSahara has become a key instrument for Sahrawi and Moroccan filmmakers to gain mutual understanding and dialogue on peace”.

You will be probably also look for films that meet the above mentioned goals in some way.

*Issues that may be sensitive or controversial issues in many communities include:*

- Women’s and children’s rights
- Minority and marginalised populations’ rights (for example disabled, homeless, street children, albino populations, LGBT, interracial couples, Roma people, Afro Latin populations, migrants, and religious minorities)
- Economic and political transparency
- Use of natural resources
- Coming to terms with the past: truth, accountability, reconciliation and transitional justice
- Civil society and freedom of speech

When thinking about basic human rights issues, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is a starting point. For example, Prague-based International Human Rights Festival One World’s programming is associated with this traditional understanding of human rights that addresses the right to physical and mental integrity, political rights and civil rights, social, economic and cultural rights.

The role of One World is to bring these difficult issues to the broad public, even broadening the definition of human rights by finding unexpected connections and using creative approaches to documentary filmmaking.

## Categories

Once you identify your main topics/areas of focus, you can either connect them with *single films* or *create whole categories*; putting more films under one programming category enables you to examine issues from more angles. The categories can be fixed or changed every year, but it might be best to repeat some of them for at least two consecutive editions so the audience can become familiar with them. It is also good to play with the names of the categories and not be too literal. Some examples of past programming categories include:

*Tolerance/Intolerance* (One World): Thematic films on racism, nationalism and radicalism, drawing attention to the rising force of the neo-Nazi movement in

Europe, racist violence, and the role of the media in spreading populism and the mechanisms used to increase the movement's membership base.

*Matter of Act (Movies That Matter)*: Portraits of human rights defenders throughout the world, showing their fight against injustice and oppression. Multiple topics were displayed in films that showed what dangers these activists have to face in order to do their work.

*Youth Empowerment and Tribute to Nelson Mandela's Legacy (FiSahara)*: Many of the screenings and roundtables focused either specifically or generally on the intersection of these themes. Youth roundtables focused on Mandela's contribution to youth; a roundtable with former South African political prisoners also included a former Sahrawi prisoner of conscience and centred on parallels between both struggles.

*Festival Memoria Verdad Justicia (Guatemala)*: The program has been a special selection for the actual historical process of Guatemala. We have had several sections and an annual focus with films on a special topic that is relevant for the country like Transitional Justice, Land and Natural Resources, Crisis and Migration, Woman and Memory. Permanent sections include: "Memory, truth, justice" that screens traditional human rights films; "World Panorama", that offers successful and innovative documentaries; and "Cine 15+", made up of special and non-public screenings for students and their teachers. One of the most important sections of the festi-

val is "Visual Memory Guatemala", during which we offer (and subtitle if necessary) foreign productions on Guatemala that have never been seen with in the country.

*Flashpoint HRFF (India)*: Programming centres around a different theme on each day of the festival. For example, the 3rd edition of Flashpoint offered three different thematic concepts on the three days of the festival: "Political, Social & Personal Boundaries", "Sexuality & Gender", and "Community Action".

The general mantra for programming can be summarised in three words: *Educate, Engage, and Entertain*.

Prepare a programme that brings new information to your audience (educate), without being boring and moralising (entertain), while at the same time motivating and inspiring them (engage).

If your festival is comprised only of non-confrontational, glossy films, it will be boring and less thought provoking than a varied selection that surprises and disturbs the audience with unexpected types of films.

Here are some examples of potentially unexpected films:

*Emergency Shelter*: Documentary consisting of a shocking interview with a crippled Chinese lawyer who was made homeless by authorities for defending the rule of law in her country. Due to the low

production quality, the film was too difficult for the audience to follow.

*The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo:* Heart-wrenching testimonies of perpetrators and victims of brutal sexual assaults bringing to light a “hidden weapon” of the Congolese war. Despite the harshness of the film, the audience was able to identify with the victims and learn about how perpetrators can be brought to justice.

*Scarlet Road: A Sex Worker’s Journey:* An intimate and taboo-breaking story of an Australian sex worker who provides sexual services to people with physical disabilities. For many people in the audience it was the first time when they started thinking about the fact that people with disabilities can have a fulfilling sexual life.

*My Makzhen and Me:* A film by a young Moroccan about the pro-democracy February 20th Movement in Morocco. This film was screened at FiSahara 2013. The audience of Sahrawis had rarely seen films made by Moroccans and it was revealing for them to not only see the level of repression faced by Moroccans from their own government, but also to meet the filmmaker, who shocked many when he openly supported Sahrawis’ right to self-determination. This was an example of how film can act as an instrument for mutual understanding and peace-building.

*Thembi:* Despite her unlimited energy and exceptional courage, this gentle and incisive documentary shows

that Thembi is all too human. Her desire to live, love and leave behind a legacy didn’t make her any less susceptible to insecurity, social pressure, exhaustion and the whims of being a celebrity.

In addition to these highly relevant and important films, it is worth trying to identify an *audience hit* to help to attract attention to the festival and subsequently draw their interest to other films that you might consider more compelling.

## What Does a Hit Look Like?

A hit is usually a film with an intriguing topic and a strong, easily understood story that attracts a wide audience; in other words, it must be an example of good filmmaking. Typically the film has a charismatic protagonist and a cool title. One example is *Autumn Gold*; Czech audiences fell in love with the film’s characters—senior athletes in their 80s and 90s who, despite their age, maintain a happy spirit and admirable levels of fitness. However, it is important to remember that what constitutes an audience hit is not always predictable. Your audience may love a totally different film than the one you had anticipated. You can help “create” a hit by inviting a special guest to the film and giving it special attention in the festival’s publicity.

Locally-made films can be enormous hits, especially if the audience identifies with protagonists and story. For instance, FiSahara’s biggest hit, screened in 2013, was *Divided Homeland*, the first feature film

ever to be entirely produced by Sahrawis. This film was made by students at FiSahara's film school.

In Guatemala, *Pussy Riots: A Punk Prayer*, and *The Lord of the Flies* were hits with the students. The festival's organisers also believe they motivated student protests by screening *The Penguin Revolution* and *The Chilean Spring* about the Chilean student movement.

## Local Films

We recommend you look for local productions to program—these films are easier to understand and your audience is more likely to identify with the issues they address. New audiences who are not used to watching films on the big screen tend to love films made in their own communities, particularly if the filmmaker uses a narrative to which they can relate.

There are two ways to deal with local films if any emerge in your country. You can either include them in the thematic categories according to their topic, or you can stress the fact that they were made nationally or locally and include them in a separate category. It is good to have suitable name for this category (for example “Czech films, Czech perspectives”, so it is easy to understand that this category contains local films).

Local films are usually easier to acquire and are an effective way of building good relations with your film-

making community. Local filmmakers tend to appreciate invitations to festivals, which provide them with an opportunity to be inspired by foreign artists' films and to network with other local filmmakers and human rights activists. Consequently, local films in the programme provide international guests an insight into local issues.

Freedom Film Festival in Malaysia makes great use of the potential of local production. By having filmmakers among their organisers, they also have access to Malaysian films. Festival director Anna Har explains, “Our aim is to encourage social filmmaking and human rights in our country. Most of the time content takes precedent over artistic quality of the film when selecting, as we know local films will be interesting enough to generate discussion amongst our audience based on the content. This is also caused by our local situation, where alternative information is hard to come by. We would also pair a local film with an international film of a similar topic to give viewers a wider perspective of the issue”.

FiSahara screens Sahrawi-made films (mostly shorts, as Sahrawis are just starting out with filmmaking) that deal with a plethora of issues affecting the community such as health problems, chronic unemployment, long-term separation from family members, and the disappeared and mutilated from war.

Manya HRIF has integrated local films into its previous editions by combining them with international



*Outdoor screening at Street Cinema Festival (Festival Cine en la Calle, Bethania) in Guatemala. Photo: Archive of Movies that Matter.*

ones. In 2012, a local experimental film *My Opinion* about views from the general public regarding homosexuality in Uganda sparked a heated argument, which led to further discussion about the issue.

While in Guatemala most films screened at the festival are produced outside the country, the opening film is always a Guatemalan one.

The programming at Flashpoint brings in both well-known and lesser known Indian films on human rights issues, and also uses a mix of documentary and fictional films in order to create an engaging and diverse bouquet that appeals to a broader audience segment. Local films provide the audience with an opportunity to interact with the actors, filmmakers, and technicians who may be well-known/a star and able to draw in a bigger audience as well as media attention

If your community is still not making many films, you can search for films made in the region (including neighbouring countries) that address similar issues and employ similar language. If film interest builds in your community, but there are still no local people making films, think about incorporating simple filmmaking workshops into the festival. Some festivals such as Ciné Institute in Haiti, FiSahara in the Sahrawi refugee camps, and Film Aid International in the Dadaab refugee camp (Kenya) have done this successfully and have gone on to open local film schools. The impact of these film festivals has been

tremendous, empowering communities to tell their own stories through film. Many funders will support festivals that offer audio-visual training and generate long-term impact in their communities.

FiSahara's flagship workshop teaches Sahrawi video activists and filmmakers from the refugee camps and the occupied Western Sahara how to film, narrate, edit and share human rights-themed films. They also offer a children's filmmaking workshop, a youth-oriented videogame production workshop and a gender-specific workshop that teaches women to use cell phones to make short films that address issues in their community.

Manya Human Rights International Film Festival conducts children's film workshops that provide an opportunity for children between the ages of eight and nineteen-years-old to learn the basics of telling stories using film. They are also planning a pilot women's training activity for selected female participants between the ages of nineteen and thirty-two to learn how to tell stories in order to change the mindset of boys and men in reducing gender-based violence.

## **Programming Challenges and Considerations**

There are several major decisions you need to make regarding your programming as well as several circumstances that need to be taken into consideration.

- Reaching your target group (addressing local issues, showing parallels, making sure the films can be understood by new audiences)
- Programming documentary versus fiction films
- Prioritizing formal/stylistic quality versus the importance of the story
- Addressing sensitive issues, taboos, and risk analysis

## Reaching Your Target Group

To achieve appropriate sensitivity, it is essential to know the local reality for your festival very well; be aware of the level of your audience's education and understand the formal as well as unwritten laws, customs and traditions. This will better enable you to anticipate an audience's reaction and possible consequences of screening a particular film.

## Using Fiction Films

Using fiction films is a good way of starting off a festival in a country or community where people are not used to watching documentaries, in particular due to the low quality of TV production, lack of film culture or access to audio-visuals. At FiSahara, the new festival audience is more engaged by fiction than by documentary because film has never been a part of Sahrawi storytelling culture, which is predominantly oral (poetry, song, etc.).

At Manya HRIFF, documentary films in regards to the new audiences are more associated with TV produc-

tions whereas fiction films especially blockbusters from Hollywood (USA) and Nollywood (Nigeria) are very popular. Normally in our programming we get questions like, "Is that a movie?" referring to a documentary film.

## Formal Quality Versus Importance of the Story

In the case of documentaries, it is especially important to include well-made films with strong narratives in order to convince your local audience that they are fun to watch, often suspenseful and that they have great stories similar to fiction films. In the beginning editions of a festival, it is vital to fight the misconception (if it is present locally) that documentary is a boring genre that should only be watched on TV. In terms of local documentaries, it pays to be lenient and favour the strength of the topic and the authenticity of the film over filmmaking brilliance or formal quality.

## Sensitive Issues

It is up to each festival to estimate the risks and either decide whether or not to screen a film that addresses taboo issues, or to instead build support for the festival by selecting films about less sensitive issues. If you decide to select a film on a sensitive topic, conduct a risk analysis and create a plan to mitigate or deal with potential risks.

*Side by Side*, an international LGBT festival in Russia, openly opposes the homophobic campaigns from



*Autumn Gold was a hit at One World FF in Prague. Jiri Soukup (protagonist) and Jan Tenhaven (director) at the opening ceremony. Photo by Josef Rabara.*

local authorities both through their programming and by taking active part in protests. However, they often have to face bomb threats and always need to be prepared to move their screenings in order to ensure the security of the audience.

At Flashpoint in India, there was a special concern about screening a film on Kashmir, a region that is divided politically and along the lines of religion. The film *Inshallah* depicted how the government branded innocent people as militants.

Generally it is best to keep in mind that it is not just a single film that you are introducing to the audience but an entire topic or issue. Although you are not responsible for the film's content, be prepared to face and deal with any questions, disputes, or negative reactions after the screening from the audience or in the media. Be able to defend your decision to show the film publicly. You can also organise small screenings to deal with sensitive issues, engaging local community leaders to select the best target audience as well as ensure that the screening is followed up with a discussion that enables the audience to debate the issue in a secure and safe setting, helped by expert facilitators.

## Taboos and Parallels

This is a question of even greater responsibility in post-conflict, non-democratic, transitional countries whose audience will be highly sensitive to issues that remind them of their own suffering and difficulties. The programmer should select films that will help the viewer to better deal with his or her trauma, rather than deepen it.

Often this can be achieved by selecting a film where the local audience is able to find parallels with their own experience. It is advisable to include films in your program that deal with the same problematic (ethnic conflicts, war traumas, dissident activities, etc.), but that take place in other geographical or cultural contexts. These films can then be used as a basis for discussion on local issues. It is also a very effective

way to show how people deal with similar problems in different parts of the world. Films that depict high levels of suffering can deepen traumas, so be sure that the films also have an empowering effect, such as showing how a community successfully struggles against poverty or oppression. You can also pair a local film with an international film addressing a similar topic in order to offer viewers a wider perspective on the issue.

Here are some examples of taboo issues in different geographical, cultural and religious contexts. Note that these examples are not exhaustive, as taboos cut across national, cultural and religious boundaries:

- LGBT issues in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Middle East, and parts of Europe
- Critique of governments under dictatorships; testimonies on governmental and non-state actors' violence against populations in conflict and post-conflict countries
- Women's emancipation or reproductive and sexual rights in conservative countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East
- Female Genital Mutilation practices
- Openly apartheid practices in America, Asia, Europe, Middle East countries

## Programming in Practice

The following are some sources and methods programmers can use to acquire films:

- Visits to festivals or consultations with existing festivals
- Websites of similar film events (human rights festivals, film clubs)
- Websites of film distributors, sales agents, production companies and TV stations
- Websites of national film centres, film institutes, NGOs, community and social justice movements, including foundations supporting human rights filmmaking and other institutions dealing with films or human rights (e.g. OSI)
- Various online databases, such as Documentary Educational Resources
- Film schools and universities
- Collaboration with another human rights film festival and asking for their help with print sources or introductions

One of the most efficient ways to find good films is to personally visit other festivals. Use their video libraries, set up meetings with distributors and make use of other networking events. However, this is an expensive option. It is easier and less costly to look for films using online resources such as online databases, festival catalogues or filmmakers' and distributors' web pages. You can also approach more experienced festivals over email for good tips on where to start.

*The Human Rights Film Network* (<http://www.humanrightsfilmnetwork.org/>) is a very good resource for recommendations. Each region has emblematic human rights film festivals that can help you find the most

appropriate films and guests for your event. Also, you can cooperate with other festivals that screen films subtitled in languages that you need, e.g. the festival in Guatemala cooperates with festivals in Mexico because they have many films with Spanish subtitles.

Most films have screening rights (and fees) attached to them (see below) but an increasing number of filmmakers who want their work to be seen by as many as possible are also releasing their work under licenses that allow non-profit screenings to be free (such as Creative Commons, <http://vimeo.com/creativecommons>). While these films may not be blockbusters, there are interesting works worth looking into, especially if you do not have many resources when just starting out.

## Key Actors

*Filmmaker:* A creative person who shot the film; he or she intends his/her film to be screened as much as possible, and usually wishes to visit the festival as a reward for providing the film; it is generally easy to negotiate with him/her but in many cases he/she doesn't own the rights to the film.

*Producer:* an executive person (or a company representative) who invested money into the film's development; he/she often deals with film rights, copies of the film, publicity, and other practical tasks. The producer's intention is to show the film at festivals but also to earn the invested money back.

*Distributor/Sales Agent:* Business person/an agent who buys rights to many films and represents and distributes them through various means; the purpose for distributors is profit so he/she tries to sell the screening rights to as many festivals, TV stations, and institutions as possible.

*Film Institutes and Schools:* They represent the films produced in their country/school; they can either stand for a producer or a distributor; generally it is easier to negotiate with them as their aim is to promote the filmmaking.

Filmmakers, producers, distributors, and film institutions are accustomed to receiving film inquiries so don't be afraid to contact them. Send a brief but clear invitation email asking them to provide a DVD screener or online link for previewing.

*Here is an example of an invitation email:*

*Dear XY,*

*We are pleased to invite you to submit your film " ... " to be considered for screening at the 1st Human Rights Film Festival held in Prague, Czech Republic from 10-15 September, 2014.*

*The festival features engaged documentary filmmaking while at the same time demonstrating high artistic qualities. It consists of thematic categories and educational screenings at schools and other events.*

*More information, including detailed submission guidelines, can be found at: [www.hrff.cz](http://www.hrff.cz).*

*All entries should include a DVD screener (preview copy of the film) and an application you will find online / attached. This can also be emailed to us at submission [at] hrff.cz*

*Please send your entries to:*

*Human Rights Film Festival  
Street No.  
110 00 Prague 1  
Czech Republic*

*Online viewing of films is also possible.*

*Deadline for submission is 20 July 2014.*

*If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at [program@hrff.cz](mailto:program@hrff.cz).*

*Thank for your kind attention to this letter.*

*With best wishes,*

*YX*

## **Selection Process**

Your efforts to collect all the relevant films for your festival topics will likely result in having far more DVDs

and online links then your actual programme can accommodate. It is important to preview films as soon as you receive them. At least two other people in the team should also preview the films. You should hold regular meetings to discuss and evaluate the films you have each seen (every week or two weeks). If your festival is in a local community that has been affected by human rights issues, include community leaders in your screening sessions so that they can help you flag any potential problems or make recommendations regarding a particularly potent film.

While watching the film submissions, take notes as they will be helpful in evaluating discussions. You can classify the film and sometimes assign it a preliminary category within a programme. The discussion will help you to strengthen your opinions and defend your reasons why a specific film should be included or not.

## Pre-selection Process

If you are already dealing with hundreds of films in pre-selection, it is good to set up a system of evaluation at the very beginning.

- Pre-selection committee
- Evaluation system. You can grade the film on a scale, such as 1= best, 5= poor. You should also evaluate the content of the film and filmmaking/technical quality and write a short description of your impression of the film and whether you should recommend the film or not. Add a section about

whether the film is appropriate for your target audience by checking with your list of programming “rules” (re: dealing with cultural, religious and other sensitivities).

- Expert review
- Pilot screening

It’s helpful to set up a pre-selection committee comprised of several people who have been involved in the festival organisation for some time, have the necessary background, and above all understand what you are trying to achieve with the festival. If this is your first festival, this type of person may be particularly useful to you. Other festivals may be able to suggest possible screeners if you cannot find enough, but always look for people sensitive to your political/cultural context. The pre-selectors can be voluntary or paid positions, depending on your budget. All pre-selectors must deliver a written evaluation of the film to be passed on to the programmer(s). The pre-selectors need to have a unified evaluation system, such as giving the films grades within a certain scale. Both form and content should be the subject of evaluation.

In some cases, you might need to seek out greater expertise on an unfamiliar film topic. For these purposes, it is convenient to set up a *reference group of experts* who will provide feedback. For example, these experts can be journalists, NGO representatives, social justice activists or academics. This also will help you establish a network of contacts that will be helpful later when searching for debater leaders/



Sahrawis take part in filmmaking workshops during FiSahara. Photo by María Carrón.

participants. Also, if you intend the film to be screened to a specific type of audience, such as students, it is useful to organise a *pilot screening* to sample audiences from your community to confirm you have made the right film choice.

Once you make your final decisions in the pre-selection phase you can start to contact the makers/distributors of the selected films. Send an email announcing your decision, *an email of confirmation* to include the specific film in your programme and kindly ask for permission as well as request the various materials needed for the screening.

This must take place at least two months before the festival as the whole process of getting permission and requested materials such as dialogue list, stills and the screening copy, can take a significant amount of time.

*Here is an example of a confirmation letter:*

*Dear XY,*

*We are pleased to inform you that your film ..... was selected for screening at the 1st edition of Human Rights Film Festival. It will take place in Prague, Czech Republic from 10 to 15 September, 2014. Please let us know as soon as possible if you agree with your film being presented at One World.*

*If you are willing to let us screen your film, please pro-*

*vide us with the necessary materials (dialogue lists, stills) and information (contacts and credits) as soon as possible—no later than 20 July, 2014.*

*Thank you for your cooperation and we hope to hear from you soon.*

*Best regards,*

*YX*

## **Screening Rights and Fees**

For the past few decades, films have been treated as a regular “business product” on the market. Clearing screening rights with filmmakers, distributors or producers often resembles trade negotiating. Generally you must *be prepared to pay to screen films*. It is both fair and logical.

However, there are exceptions and mutually beneficial ways to avoid paying large screening fees that would decimate your budget:

*The person who handles the film rights decides to give it to you free.* This is usually filmmakers who appreciate the opportunity for their film to be screened at a festival and/or value the human rights focus of your event. You should briefly introduce your event—especially if it is new – and include important details, such as the purpose and audience of your festival and your supporters and partners.

*You get the screening rights in exchange for inviting a film guest to the festival.* Many producers and filmmakers are open to giving the film if you offer to cover two nights of accommodation and travel expenses for the director or other crew member. It is often better to pay for the guest rather than a fee, depending on the travel costs. The audience also always appreciates the chance to participate in Q&A sessions with filmmakers.

*Bargain!* Films are often treated as a commodity; it is not inappropriate to try to lower the amount of money asked for its screening. Distributors and sales agents are used to these strategies so don't be embarrassed, especially if you are a small start-up festival in a poor community. There are limits to bargaining; try to find a sum that more or less satisfies both sides. Some films have reduced prices for NGO screenings.

Your reputation is at stake when it comes to negotiating screening rights. Be polite, respectful and keep your word if comes to an agreement (e.g. regarding the number of screenings). *Only good relations with the filmmaking community and the industry will allow you to enter the world of respected festivals and secure entries for your next editions.*

## Screening Schedule

Suitable placement of your festival is something that can highly influence the course of the whole event. In order to get high attendance you need to think of these factors:

- Other competing events taking place at the same time
- Season of the year
- Days and times of the screening
- Holidays, dates of festivities

The organiser must be able to estimate the best days of the week and times of the screenings in relation to audience habits and spare time, but also with regards to security issues. People will not come to your screenings if they are not able to get home safely.

Another important factor is gender sensitivity in programming. In many communities, women not only work but have to take care of their families and have set schedules. In some conservative cultures, women are not able to stay out late at night. Make sure you pick a time that suits women and speak with community leaders to find out how you can adapt your programme to meet women's needs. In certain places, getting the word out to women guarantees an audience, as they can act as transmitters and organisers in their communities.

When programming films it is important to leave sufficient time after the screening for Q&A sessions. An *opening film* should be picked carefully to attract enough attention. It can be a film addressing issues that are particularly relevant to the local community.

Many festivals have *at least three consecutive days* of screenings.



Opening ceremony at Karama HRFF. Festival director Sawsan Darwaza introduces main topics of the festival. Photo: Archive of Karama HRFF.

## Main Tips:

*Be an Activist:* You don't need to be an expert or academic to programme a human rights film festival but rather an activist who is determined to influence things around him or her.

*Identity:* Answer basic questions about who you are as a festival: what is the background of your region and what is the mission of your festival? Adjust the programme and its structure to your festival's identity and location. Know who your audience is. Starting simple pays off.

*Genres:* Decide if you want to mix documentaries with fiction films to ease the launch for inexperienced viewers; including shorts and animations is a good choice for the beginning of a festival (and can be useful for particular groups like children and students).

*Main Theme:* Pre-select a main topic for your festival that you want to promote. Start with key issues relevant to your setting and search for suitable films that align with those topics.

*Sources:* Identify good sources for films or approach friendly festivals that can provide film tips and offer introductions.

*Selection:* Set up a selection team, including pre-selectors or experts; hold regular meetings and discuss the films; save everyone's remarks so that you can always refer to them later.

*Controversy:* Identify potentially sensitive issues in your films to estimate audiences' reactions and be ready to defend your decision to screen a specific film.

*Fees:* Either allocate enough money for the fees or be ready to negotiate, but always be fair.

*Schedule:* Schedule screenings according to the habits of your target audience, giving main films and audience hits "prime-time" slots in your main venues; carefully program local films; put shorts in blocks and always schedule enough time for Q&As.

## Filmography

*La Isla: Archivos de una Tragedia* (Island: Archive of a Tragedy, dir. Uli Stelzner, 2009).

*Emergency Shelter* (dir. He Yang, 2010).

*The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* (dir. Lisa F. Jackson, 2007).

*Scarlet Road—A Sex Worker's Journey* (dir. Catherine Scott, 2011).

*My Makzhen and Me* (dir. Nadir Bouhmouch, 2012).

*Thembi* (dir. Jo Menel, 2010).

*Divided Homeland*

*Pussy Riots: A Punk Prayer* (dir. Mike Lerner, Maxim Pozdorovkin, 2013).

*The Lord of the Flies* (dir. Harry Hook, 1990).

*The Penguin Revolution*

*The Chilean Spring*

*My Opinion*

*Inshallah* (dir. Ashvin Kumar, 2012).