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PINK SARIS

A FILM BY KIM LONGINOTTO



WMM

WOMEN MAKE MOVIES
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SYNOPSIS

“A girl’s life is cruel...A woman’s life is very cruel,” notes Sampat Pal, the complex protagonist at the center of PINK SARIS, internationally acclaimed director Kim Longinotto’s latest foray into the lives of extraordinary women (SISTERS IN LAW, DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE, ROUGH AUNTIES). Sampat should know – like many others she was married as a young girl into a family which made her work hard and beat her often. But unusually, she fought back, leaving her in-laws and eventually becoming famous as a champion for beleaguered women throughout Uttar Pradesh, many of whom find their way to her doorstep. Like Rekha, a fourteen year old Untouchable, who is three months pregnant and homeless – unable to marry her unborn child’s father because of her low caste. Fifteen year old Renu’s husband from an arranged marriage has abandoned her, her father-in-law has been raping her and she’s threatening to throw herself under a train. Both young women, frightened and desperate, reach out for their only hope: Sampat Pal and her Gulabi Gang, Northern India’s women vigilantes in pink. PINK SARIS is an unflinching and often amusing look at these unlikely political activists and their charismatic leader; in extraordinary scenes, we watch Sampat launch herself into the centre of family dramas, witnessed by scores of spectators, convinced her mediation is the best path for these vulnerable girls. Her partner Babuji, who has watched Sampat change over the years, is less certain....

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CREDITS
2010, 96 MINUTES, COLOR

**DIRECTOR/+
CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Kim Longinotto

PRODUCERS

Amber Latif
Girjashanker Vohra

PRODUCTION MANAGERS

Clare Bailey (UK)
Tapas Chakraborty (INDIA)
Suresh Panjabi (INDIA)

EDITOR

Ollie Huddleston

SOUND

Girjahanker Vohra

MUSIC

Midival Punditz

TRANSLATOR

Amber Latif

PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Ginger Productions
Vixen Films

CHARACTERS

Renu Devi
Niranjan Pal
Sampat Pal Devi
Rekha Paswan
Shiv Devi Patel
Rampataree Yadav

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Internationally acclaimed director Kim Longinotto is one of the pre-eminent documentary filmmakers working today, renowned for creating extraordinary human portraits and tackling controversial topics with sensitivity and compassion. Longinotto's films have won international acclaim and dozens of premiere awards at festivals worldwide, including the World Cinema Jury Prize in Documentary at Sundance for *ROUGH AUNTIES*. Highlights include perhaps one of her best known works, *SISTERS IN LAW* (2005), winner of a 2008 Peabody Award and two Cannes awards, including the Cannes Prix art et Essai Award; *THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET* (2003), which won the Amnesty International DOEN Award at IDFA and Best Doc UK Spotlight at Hot Docs; the recent *HOLD ME TIGHT, LET ME GO* (2007), winner of the Special Jury Prize at the International Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam (IDFA); The BAFTA Award-winning *DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE* (1998); *DREAM GIRLS* (1993), winner of Best Documentary at Films de Femmes, Creteil; and *SHINJUKU BOYS* (1995), winner for Outstanding Documentary at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. She was also the recipient of the 2010 Hot Docs' Outstanding Achievement Award.

Longinotto studied camera and directing at England's National Film School (NFS), where she made *PRIDE OF PLACE*, a critical look at her boarding school, and *THEATRE GIRLS*, documenting a hostel for homeless women. After the NFS she worked as the cameraperson on a variety of documentaries for TV including *CROSS AND PASSION*, an account of Catholic women in Belfast, and *UNDERAGE*, a chronicle of unemployed adolescents in Coventry.

In 1986, Longinotto formed the production company Twentieth Century Vixen with Claire Hunt. Together they made *FIRERAISSER*, a look at Sir Arthur Bomber Harris and the bombing of Dresden during WWII; *EAT THE KIMONO*, about the controversial Japanese feminist performer Hanayagi Genshu; *HIDDEN FACES*, the internationally acclaimed, collaborative documentary with/about Egyptian women; and *THE GOOD WIFE OF TOKYO* about women, love and marriage in Japanese society. Throughout this time, she made a series of ten broadcast and non-broadcast videos on special needs issues, including *TRAGIC BUT BRAVE* for Channel 4. With Jano Williams, Longinotto directed the audience pleaser *DREAM GIRLS*, a BBC-produced documentary of the spectacular Japanese musical theatre company; and *SHINJUKU BOYS*, about three Tokyo women who live as men. Next, she made *ROCK WIVES* for Channel 4 about the wives and girlfriends of rock stars, followed by *DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE* with Ziba Mir-Hosseini, about women and divorce in Iran. She then made two short films for the *BEST FRIENDS* series on Channel 4: *STEVE & DAVE* - about two friends who work as a drag act and *ROB & CHRIS* about two homeless young men. Her following film, *GAEA GIRLS* made with Jano Williams, was about women wrestlers in Japan, and then *RUNAWAY*, also made with Ziba Mir-Hosseini, was set in a refuge for girls in Tehran. Her film *THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET*, about young girls in Kenya challenging the tradition of female circumcision premiered domestically at Sundance in 2003. More recent films include the highly acclaimed *SISTERS IN LAW*, about female justices in Kumba, Cameroon, and *HOLD ME TIGHT, LET ME GO*, about troubled children at England's Mulberry Bush School.

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MORE INFO

Hi-res photos are available for download on this film's web catalog page at www.wmm.com.

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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT KIM LONGINOTTO...



“Longinotto's gift for unobtrusive observation and unblinking purpose makes for a docu of uncompromised integrity and edge-of-the seat drama.” – John Anderson, *Variety*

“Kim Longinotto is one of those rare documentary-makers content to remain behind the camera. Audiences - and festival juries - love her for it.” - Helen Pidd, *The Guardian*

“[Displays] a complete lack of romanticism in her search for the ways in which women make their way through the world, and fearlessness when confronted with contradiction... This is big stuff she's dealing with.” – Jerry White, *Cinema Scope*

“Perhaps no modern nonfiction filmmaker is as adept at mining the tricky balance between intimacy and observation as Kim Longinotto.” – A.J. Schnack, *All These Wonderful Things*

“Kim Longinotto's ingenious artistry lies in an elegant ability to establish trust with subjects and a deep sensitivity to their cultural contexts, yielding an alchemical intimacy in which subtleties and complexities are allowed to surface and unfold--to breath-taking effect.” – Caroline Libresco, Senior Programmer, Sundance Film Festival

“In film after film, Longinotto discovers the heroic and the extraordinary in the most unlikely of subjects... She bears fierce and stoic witness to quite painful and intimate stories, and consistently renews our sense of hope by shining a light of love and recognition on these unsung human beings.” *Still in Motion*

“Kim Longinotto is England's answer to Frederick Wiseman.” - *IndieWire*

“The intrepid Kim Longinotto delivers another dispatch from the female frontier with PINK SARIS.” -*Variety*

“[A] film about...the enormity of the challenges anyone fighting for women's rights in rural India will face.” - *Screen Daily*



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KIM LONGINOTTO

Honesty best policy for queen of docs

She loves *X Factor*, thinks her new film knocks C4's India season for six and is personally handling its distribution. Kim Longinotto tells Chris Curtis why docs have a duty to tackle issues head on



JOSEPH MICHAEL

'My students thought I was being tongue-in-cheek when I said I liked The X Factor, so I challenged them to test me'

Longinotto on her love of the Simon Cowell show

Don't tell the docs community, but Kim Longinotto loves *The X Factor*. During an interview at Toronto's Hot Docs in which a handful of (fairly earnest) film-makers come to pay their respects, the decorated director confesses that stories of all kinds get her excited – including those played out by Cowell and Cole on Saturday nights.

"*The X Factor* is heaven. You spend all those weeks watching Leona Lewis or Alexandra Burke being packaged as a star. It's storytelling. I teach at a film school, and the students thought I was being tongue-in-cheek when I said I liked *The X Factor*, so I challenged them to test me. I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true – there's a lot of snobbery around."

It's the kind of honesty that characterises her films, from the shocking female circumcision of *The Day I Will Never Forget* to the wry humour of *Divorce Iranian Style*, and which was rewarded with the Hot Docs Outstanding Achievement Award last month.

She tends to tackle issues head on, including those that some teller types would duck. "I won't do off-the-record, it's not fair on you," she

tells me halfway through the interview, and she feels her latest project, *Pink Saris* for Channel 4 (see box), will knock the broadcaster's recent India season for six.

"The C4 season was all based in the Bombay slums, it was all quite safe. The Kevin McCloud thing was the best, but it was all old-fashioned, surface TV. In my film, things happen in front of your eyes. There's a scene where a girl is about to kill herself, and you see a boy running away because his family has told him that they will be shamed if he marries her. You see caste in action, you're not being told about it. Some posh people in Delhi aren't going to be able to say 'this is propaganda, caste is a thing of the past'"

Loving C4

That's not to say Longinotto has a problem with C4 – far from it. Unlike some film-makers she believes the broadcaster's commitment to docs is unquestionable and is full of praise.

"There's a *True Stories* every Tuesday night and they're all on different subjects, they're different-length films. I find that pretty amazing. Where else would you get that? I love C4, but when I talk about C4 I'm really talking about individual commissioning editors, like Hamish Mykura. He wanted a few small changes to *Pink Saris* and they were all sensible and good. He suggested changing the film's title from *A Girl's Life to Pink Saris*, and he was right. It's nice to have that, instead of 'Oh my god, the commissioning editor is coming in'"

Peter Dale and Richard Klein come in for an equally star billing, with Longinotto praising their willingness to offer a light touch and not to demand a TV version of a film that is



Pink Saris: gang travels India 'protecting the powerless from those who abuse their power'

significantly different from its feature version.

While it's clear she trusts certain people, she also likes to retain control, and is striking all the distribution deals for *Pink Saris* herself. She also gives short shrift to the editing and continuity techniques used by many broadcasters. "Before a break they tell you what you're about to see, and after it they tell you what you've just seen. Then they tell you again. They tend to show you the best scene in the film at the very beginning, and by the time you see it you're just really jaded."

Jaded is how a lot of film-makers feel when they attempt to get financial backing for their work, and Longinotto is in the enviable position of having *Pink Saris* fully funded by C4.

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PINK SARIS UNCOVERING THE REAL STORY

Pink Saris is the story of the Gulabi Gang, which wears distinctive clothing and travels India "protecting the powerless from those who abuse their power". Effectively a vigilante group, the Pink Saris are led by charismatic Sampat Pal (inset, right) who is the central figure of Longinotto's 100-minute film.

It came about via an unlikely alliance of Longinotto with indie Ginger Productions, after one of its staff, Amber Ronowicz, approached her with the idea. She wasn't able to raise the money for the doc until Longinotto stepped in and convinced Hamish Mykura to back the project.



Another contributor on Ginger's books, Amber Latif, "blossomed" while working with Longinotto on the demanding 10-week shoot, which revealed more shades of grey than expected. What emerged was that Pal was changing as a result of the power and celebrity status her group had conferred on

her. "She's very damaged – how could she not be?" asks Longinotto. "She was married at eight and had a terrible life before becoming an activist. That's more interesting than a perfect person."

The film will TX on C4 in early 2011 and Longinotto hopes it will be the definitive piece on the Gulabi Gang. "There have been a couple of films already, one for an Australian broadcaster and one with [news presenter and Al Jazeera reporter] Rageh Omaar, but they got the propaganda version – the heroic women fighting with sticks. That's why you need a long shoot, so the story can come to you."

LONGINOTTO FILMOGRAPHY (SELECTED WORK)



■ ROUGH AUNTIES 2008

■ HOLD ME TIGHT, LET ME GO 2007 (above)

■ SISTERS IN LAW 2005



■ THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET 2002 (above)

■ RUNAWAY 2001

■ GAEA GIRLS 2000



■ DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE 1998 (above)

■ ROCK WIVES 1996

■ SHINJUKU BOYS 1995 (below)



■ DREAM GIRLS 1993

■ THE GOOD WIFE OF TOKYO 1992

■ EAT THE KIMONO 1989

■ UNDERAGE 1982

■ PRIDE OF PLACE 1976

‘Visiting India was the most powerful experience I’ve ever had because its contrasts are so extreme’

Does she have empathy for her less established peers?

“I know people have to find a quarter of the money from here, a quarter from there. *Divorce Iranian Style* took me two years to raise the money. But it depends a lot on the subject. Everyone is interested in India at the moment, and we think we know it. We know Indian people, we’re starting to watch Indian films, it’s part of our world view.”

But *Pink Saris*, as Longinotto quickly points out is less *Slumdog Millionaire*, more Aravind Adiga novel *The White Tiger*, with its focus on India’s underclass and rural society, which the novelist calls The Darkness.

The effect of visiting the country has been profound and “haunting”, she says. “It was the most powerful experience I’ve ever had because the contrast is so extreme. You go to Delhi and it’s a big city with lots of money, an emerging superpower. Then you’re in these villages where a girl has been raped by her father-in-law and his attitude is: ‘Yeah? Your point is?’”

Captivated by India

Longinotto is so captivated by India that it will also be the setting for her next film, which came to her via a friend of *Pink Saris*’ sound recordist, but which she is keeping close to her chest for now.

You might make a good guess at its themes, but the tendency to pigeon-hole her as a women’s issues film-maker is too simple. *Pink Saris*, like South African childcare film *Rough Aunties* and culture clash doc *The Good Wife Of Tokyo* are all about women, but they are just as much about how societies cope when their cultural heritage and traditions collide with modern values.

“That’s my obsession,” she admits. “Vera from *Sisters In Law* [about two lawyers’ attempts to tackle domestic violence in Cameroon] came to a meeting with the UN. The woman who introduced her said: ‘The UN respects tradition, we work within tradition’, but Vera came on stage and said: ‘I don’t care about tradition, that’s what I’m fighting against.



I’m interested in human rights.”

It almost sounds like a manifesto for Longinotto’s films. As a Western film-maker making largely international docs she knows she’s on tricky ground, but is unrepentant in her desire to highlight unfair social situations or terrible practices through her work.

Putting women centre stage (clockwise from top left): *Sisters In Law*; *Rough Aunties*; *Divorce Iranian Style* and *Gaea Girls*

“We’ve gone beyond political correctness, but not from a *Daily Mail* point of view. You can’t say that just because something is someone’s culture, it’s good.

“Culture’ is cutting women’s genitalia off – are we going to support that because it’s 2,000 years old?”

KIM LONGINOTTO ON ...

Her love of TV

People ask what docs have inspired me, and I just tell them I love TV. I love the Swedish *Wallander*, I worship *Mad Men* – the way it can say things about casual racism or gay rights and pick them up weeks later. That’s what TV can do as an art form.

Filming *Pink Saris*

Pink Saris is raw, it’s rough, it was a tough film to make and not all the characters were sympathetic – one of them had left her baby girl to die. It’s not just being physically prepared for walking 5k in the hot sun, it’s being mentally prepared.



Film distribution

We make great music and TV in the UK, but we haven’t got anything like [US women’s film promoter and distributor] Women Make Movies. They have a network that makes films last for a long time, schools and colleges. That’s what we need.

India’s hidden society

Its feudal, it reminded me of Elizabethan times – burning girls alive. There’s a real culture of death, and it’s so relevant. You read in the papers about honour killings and you see where it comes from.