

Sisters In Law

(Docu -- U.K.)

A Film Four presentation of a Vixen Films production. (International sales: Women Make Movies, New York.) Produced by Kim Longinotto. Directed, written by Kim Longinotto, Florence Ayisi.

By DEBORAH YOUNG

British documakers Kim and Florence Ayisi present a surprisingly positive portrait of the justice system in a small town in Cameroon, where a progressive-minded female judge and lawyer forcefully intervene in cases of abuse of women and a child. Doc has the fascination of watching an African "Judge Judy" with a more important case load. It also offers the satisfaction of seeing the law being used to change patterns of social injustice. Pic is so upbeat and watchable, it could find TV and showcase theatrical pickups beyond festivals.

Longinotto's restlessly zooming camera adds to the chaos of a small law office in Kumba Town, Cameroon, where lawyer Ngassa talks to clients, and plays with her small son on breaks. First of three interwoven stories is the most moving, that of 6-year-old Manka, who is brought in covered with scars. Questioning the child and witnesses, Madame Ngassa reconstructs the cruel beatings the child received from an aunt to whom she was entrusted.

The second case involves a battered wife who bravely brings her violent husband to court, over the objections of the Muslim community to which she belongs. After Amina wins a divorce in court, the filmmakers capture the undisguised joy of her female neighbors. It is the first time a man has been convicted of spousal abuse in 17 years, and the case will set a precedent.

In a third case, Sonita, who is barely an adolescent, accuses a neighbor of rape. She, too, convinces the judge and the man is sentenced to prison.

These three successful cases have obviously been selected by Longinotto ("Divorce Iranian Style," "The Day I Will Never Forget") and Ayisi, a lecturer at the Intl. Film School Wales, to overturn stereotypes and make the point there is more to Africa than poverty, misery and injustice. Notes Judge Ntuba, "Men and women are equal in this country."

Camera (color, DV-to-35mm), Longinotto; editor, Ollie Huddleston; music, D'Gary; sound (Dolby SR), Mary Milton. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Directors Fortnight), May 19, 2005. Running time: 108 MIN. (Pidgin English, Hausa, English dialogue)