



Sisters in Law

A film by Florence Ayisi and Kim Longinotto



**"I consider SISTERS IN LAW one of the best documentaries of all times
and Kim Longinotto, one of the great documentary filmmakers of our day."**

-Stella Pence, Telluride Film Festival

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Synopsis



Winner of the Prix Art et Essai at the Cannes Film Festival and screened at more than 120 festivals worldwide, *SISTERS IN LAW* is the latest work from festival favorite Kim Longinotto and co-directed by Florence Ayisi. Longinotto's other award-winning films include recent Emmy nominee, *THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET*, which premiered in the US at the Sundance Film Festival, *DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE*, *DREAM GIRLS* and *SHINJUKU BOYS*, among others.

SISTERS IN LAW is a totally fascinating, often hilarious look at the work of one small courthouse in Cameroon where two women determined to change a village are making progress that could change the world. The tough-minded state prosecutor Vera Ngassa and Court President Beatrice Ntuba are working to help women in their Muslim village find the courage to fight often-difficult cases of abuse, despite pressures from family and their community to remain silent. With fierce compassion, they dispense wisdom, wisecracks and justice in fair measure—handing down stiff sentences to those convicted. A cross between *Judge Judy* and *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, *SISTERS IN LAW* has audiences cheering when justice is served.

In signature style, Longinotto's unobtrusive camera captures an abundance of colorful characters, allowing their powerful stories to unfold effortlessly without need for narration. Inspiring and uplifting, *SISTERS IN LAW* presents a strong and positive view of African women—and captures the emerging spirit of courage, hope and the possibility of change.



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Sisters in Law

Credits

2005 · 104 minutes · Color

Producer/Director/Director of Photography

Kim Longinotto

Co-Director

Florence Ayisi

Editor

Ollie Huddleston

Sound

Mary Milton

Music

D'Gary

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Biographies

Director/Producer Kim Longinotto

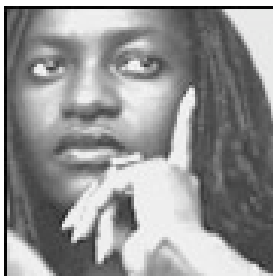


Internationally acclaimed director Kim Longinotto is one of the preeminent documentary filmmakers working today, renowned for creating extraordinary human portraits and tackling controversial topics with sensitivity and compassion. Longinotto's films have won international acclaim and dozens of premiere awards at festivals worldwide. Highlights include the Amnesty International DOEN Award at IDFA and Best Doc UK Spotlight at Hot Docs for **THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET**; the Grand Prize for Best Documentary San Francisco Int'l Film Festival and Silver Hugo Award at the Chicago International Film Festival for **DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE**; Best Documentary at Films de Femmes, Creteil for **DREAM GIRLS**; and Outstanding Documentary at the SF Gay and Lesbian Film Festival for **SHINJUKU BOYS**.

Longinotto studied camera and directing at England's National Film School, where she made **PRIDE OF PLACE**, a critical look at her boarding school, and **THEATRE GIRLS**, documenting a hostel for homeless women. After graduating from 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 **FIRERAISER**, 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 next film, **GAEA GIRLS** made with Jano Williams is about women wrestlers in Japan. **RUNAWAY** was also made with Ziba Mir-Hosseini and is 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 in the U.S. at Sundance in 2003. Her latest film, **SISTERS IN LAW**, set in Kumba, Cameroon, premiered and won two prizes at Cannes. She is currently researching a new film in Africa.

For more information on Longinotto's prior films, visit www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/makers/fm44.shtml



Co-Director Florence Ayisi

Florence Ayisi studied producing and directing at the Northern School of Film and Television (NSTV) in Leeds, England. She co-directed the documentary **REFLECTIONS**, about a black British dancer-choreographer in Cardiff in 2003. She has just completed a short film, **MY MOTHER: ISANGE** to mark International Women's Day 2005. She teaches practice-based research at the International Film School Wales, University of Wales, Newport.



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- Cannes Film Festival – Prix Art et Essai & Special Mention Europa Cinemas
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- International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) – Opening Night Film & Winner Audience Award
- Santa Barbara Intl Film Festival, Social Justice Award for Documentary Film
- Toronto International Film Festival
- Telluride Film Festival
- Real Life on Film Festival Melbourne – Best International Documentary
- Tel-Aviv International Documentary Film Festival – Best International Film
- Belfast Film Festival – First Maysles Award
- Al-Jazeera TV Festival – Silver Award
- Denver International Film Festival
- Hamptons International Film Festival
- St. Louis International Film Festival
- Montreal International Film Festival of New Cinema
- Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival - Audience Prize
- High Falls Film Festival
- Vancouver International Film Festival
- Virginia Film Festival
- Margaret Mead Film Festival
- Puerto Vallarta Film Festival
- Pacific Film Archive African Film Festival
- Palm Springs International Film Festival
- Powell River Film Festival
- Philadelphia Film Festival
- Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival
- Human Rights Nights Film Festival, Bologna – Best Long Feature
- Commonwealth Film Festival – Audience Award
- Munich Documentary Film festival – Special Documentary Prize
- Barcelona International Women's Film Festival
- Norwegian Documentary Film Festival
- Royal Television Programme Awards- Best Single Documentary



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Press Quotes

"POSITIVELY SOARS...Who are these women, and can they please take over the world soon?"

- Nathan Lee, *The New York Times*

"Illuminating, entertaining...

you might start to seriously wonder if there's a way to get [Vera Ngassa] to run for office here in America."

- Gene Seymour, *Newsday*

"A triumphal portrait

of women taking matters into their own hands."

- Joshua Land, *Time Out*

"The women are so compelling –

and the sense of justice so satisfying,

I can't imagine any audience resisting SISTERS IN LAW."

- Stuart Klawans, *The Nation*

"This is a story of real heroism that will leave you weeping, laughing and singing... My early candidate for

breakout feel-good documentary of the year."

- Andrew O'Hehir, *Salon.com*

"INSPIRATIONAL...A family-court western in which a pair of tart-talking gunslingers bring justice."

- J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*

"The **biggest little film** of 2006 so far."

- *AM New York*

"RIVETING... INSPIRATIONAL."

- *NY Daily News*

"Packs a powerful punch.

A first-rate female empowerment flick."

- Kam Williams, *Black News*



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Press Quotes (Con't)

"A riveting documentary about two remarkable women."
- *Amsterdam News*

"SHARPLY OBSERVED."
- Grady Hendrix, *The New York Sun*

"UPBEAT... POSITIVE...has the fascination
of watching an African 'Judge Judy.' "
- Deborah Young, *VARIETY*

"ENGAGING."
- *The Boston Globe*

"GRIPPING ... unexpectedly uplifting"
- *TV Guide*

"Engaging, fascinating and witty!"
- *Movie Guru*

"CURIOUSLY ADDICTING."
- *Honolulu Star Bulletin*

"Eye- and mind-opening. "
- *V.F. National Post*

"INSPIRING"
- *CTV, Toronto*

"FASCINATING...a moving testament"
- Hannah Patterson, *DOX Documentary Film Magazine*

"One of the **best documentaries of all time.**"
- *Telluride Film Festival*



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The New York Times

April 12, 2006

In 'Sisters in Law,' the Wheels of Justice Grind Fine

By NATHAN LEE

The women of Kumba Town take no guff, thanks to the clear minds, bright spirits and rock-steady ethics of the "Sisters in Law," Vera Ngassa (a prosecutor) and Beatrice Ntuba (a judge). Warmly assembled by Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi, this winning documentary follows them as they nourish grass-roots feminism in a Cameroon village.

Men stupid, cruel or negligent enough to wind up in the courthouse swiftly find their idiot assumptions exposed in the light of constitutional justice: sorry, guy, your wife doesn't have to ask permission to leave the house. Patriarchal arrogance is knocked clean off their hapless mugs as the world's worst alibis crumble before the sisterly smackdown.

The cases are appalling. A pre-pubescent girl is raped and left bleeding. A 6-year-old is beaten with a coat hanger, her body scarred with welts. The wife of a callous, vengeful jerk seeks help divorcing him. Nevertheless, the movie doesn't depress. When the right thing is done, it is uplifting in any context. "Sisters in Law" positively soars.

The movie plays like a cross between Ousmane Sembene's vibrant parable "Moolade" and Raymond Depardon's gripping procedural "The 10th District Court." It's looser than both, and would benefit from some cultural and political background. Committed, in strict vérité, to the here and now, "Sisters in Law" eschews the when and how. I'd happily watch a biographical prequel to this particular slice of life. Who are these women, and can they please take over the world soon?



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Issue 550
April 13–19, 2006

Sisters in Law

By Joshua Land

While the courtroom drama has been a Hollywood staple for decades, the past few years have witnessed the rise of the courtroom documentary as a fixture on the festival circuit. Having already codirected one of the best films of the genre, 1998's *Divorce Iranian Style*, British documentarian Kim Longinotto takes her camera to Cameroon in this witty and surprisingly upbeat look at the judicial system in the predominantly Muslim town of Kumba. As in the earlier film, Longinotto happily eschews narration, allowing her crisp, unobtrusive visual style to tell the story.

Dominated by a pair of women, judge Beatrice Ntuba and the sharp-tongued prosecutor Vera Ngassa, *Sisters in Law* follows three cases through the legal process. In one, a man is accused of raping a prepubescent girl; another involves an even younger child who's been badly scarred by her abusive aunt; in the third, a woman struggles to get a divorce from a husband who doesn't even bother to lie about the beatings he's inflicted on her. The latter case in particular illustrates the delicate balance required between respect for traditional law and the demands of modern judicial principles—that justice is served in all three cases is not the least of the stereotype-busting elements here. *Sisters in Law* is ultimately a triumphal portrait of women taking matters into their own hands, and yet another illustration of the enduring truth that civil rights are won, not granted. (Now playing; [Film Forum](#).)—Joshua Land



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salon.com

April 13, 2006

Beyond the Multiplex

By Andrew O'Hehir

My early candidate for breakout feel-good documentary of the year is "Sisters in Law," which presents a corner of rural Africa as, of all things, a functioning civil society. In Kumba, an English-speaking town in Cameroon, Christians and Muslims are getting along and two fearless female officials, prosecutor Vera Ngassa and court president Beatrice Ntuba, are cracking down on abusive husbands, child abusers and rapists. There have been no domestic-violence convictions in Kumba for 17 years, but when two different Muslim women bring charges against their husbands, Ngassa and Ntuba see an opportunity to enforce the law and change local culture.

Directors Florence Ayisi and Kim Longinotto (the latter made "Divorce Iranian Style") never try to drive home the larger lessons behind the cases Ngassa and Ntuba pursue, but they don't have to. The women of Kumba are very well aware that they find themselves at a point of collision between so-called traditional mores and "Western" values of human rights, individualism and feminism, and they have no doubt where they stand.

Some of the cases in "Sisters in Law," especially the story of a 6-year-old girl viciously abused by her aunt, for no reason in particular, are hard to watch. But even that grievously wounded little girl is lucky to be living in Kumba. When 90 percent of what we hear from Africa is doom and gloom - overpopulation, poverty, environmental degradation and economic exploitation -- it can be hard to remember that the people of that continent are not passive, pathetic victims but human beings working to improve their lives and build a future. This is a story of real heroism that will leave you weeping, laughing and singing. *(Now playing at Film Forum in New York, with more cities to follow.)*



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The Nation.

posted April 6, 2006 (April 24, 2006 issue)

Review by Stuart Klawans

In a town called Kumba in Cameroon, several different traditional societies have come up against modernity in the form of women wielding judicial power. So I learn from the documentary *Sisters in Law*, directed by Kim Longinotto with Florence Ayisi: a feature-length account of some of the cases handled in 2004 by state prosecutor Vera Ngassa and court president Beatrice Ntuba.

Two of the matters were historic: successful prosecutions of spousal abuse, brought by astonishingly brave women from the Muslim community. Others were merely heartbreaking: the rape of a 9-year-old by a Bible-thumping neighbor, the brutal beating of a tiny girl by the guardian who was "correcting" her. How did Ngassa and Ntuba come to have power to deal with these things? Unfortunately, the film gives no context. But the women--all of them--are so compelling, and the sense of justice so satisfying, that I can't imagine any audience resisting *Sisters in Law*. It premieres theatrically April 12 at New York's Film Forum.



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Newsday

NEW YORK CITY

Justice delayed, not denied

BY GENE SEYMOUR

Newsday Staff Writer

April 12, 2006

Americans are so often prone to either take apart or take for granted their judicial system that when a documentary like "Sisters in Law" comes around, many might come away from it thinking its upbeat view of how justice is dispensed in a small town in Cameroon is too good to be true.

Maybe things aren't always as triumphant or clear-cut in this West African nation's legal system as the movie would have you believe. But co-directors Kim Longinotto ("Divorce Iranian Style") and Florence Ayisi, deploying an unobtrusive yet avidly intimate approach, convince you that common sense, compassion and toughness can save the powerless and afflicted while punishing those who do the afflicting.

It helps the filmmakers' case to have two magnetic protagonists at their disposal: prosecutor Vera Ngassa and court president Beatrice Ntuba. These two no-nonsense jurists make up a kind of family services court for the village of Kumba, where religious and tribal patriarchy have for centuries imposed their immutable will upon women and children.

Three cases are weaved into "Sisters in Law's" narrative. One involves a pre-adolescent girl who accuses a neighbor of rape. Despite the suspect's feeble attempts to influence both his victim and the court, he's found guilty and imprisoned.

Another case involves a battered wife who brings her husband to trial despite objections from her Muslim community. The husband, who apparently has a long history of such behavior, seems not to know that what he did is wrong until it is emphasized by Ngassa and Ntuba.

The most wrenching case concerns a 6-year-old girl named Manka, whose scarred and battered body is brought to Ngassa. Manka's care was entrusted to an aunt, whose punishment of the child was, saying the least, cruel and unusual. When the aunt, confronted with the evidence, pleads with Ngassa by calling her "sister," the prosecutor fires back, "Don't you 'sister' me!" At which point, you might start to seriously wonder if there's a way to get this woman to run for office here in America.



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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.

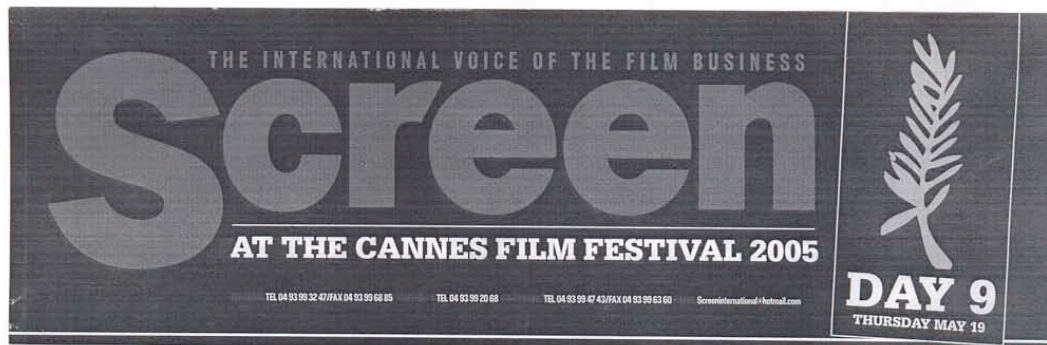
These three successful cases have obviously been selected by Longinotto ("Divorce Iranian Style," "The Day I Will Never Forget") and Ayisi, a lecturer at the Intl. Film School Wales, to overturn stereotypes and make the point there is more to Africa than poverty, misery and injustice. Notes Judge Ntuba,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



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IN THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

Kim Longinotto

The UK director tells KATY ELLIOTT why her documentary about four Cameroonian women was a surprisingly easy project to put together

Forging a career in the UK by making observational films about unknown women in far away countries should be an impossible feat. Potential financiers would decry it as dull, do-goodie, moralising stuff for the brown rice-and-sandals brigade.

But as she prepares to head off to Cannes, with *Sisters In Law*, director Kim Longinotto pins her success firmly on one man: Peter Dale, the former head of documentaries at UK broadcaster Channel 4.

Longinotto says she simply handed him a rather "scrappy little synopsis" for *Sisters In Law* and he had the courage to stump up the £160,000 required to fund the film, saving her the headache of having to raise co-production money.

Unlike other commissioning editors, Dale did not ask her to make sure there was a British angle, nor did he ask her to alter the length of the 104-minute film to fit into a

TV broadcast schedule.

"He is just one of those little chinks of hope within those structures," Longinotto explains. "I've heard people talk about how TV is damaging film but I simply could not have made this without television backing."

Since forming her own indie Twentieth Century Vixen (now just Vixen) in 1986, Longinotto has made five films set in Japan, two in Iran and two in Africa — all of them about women.

For *Sisters In Law*, Longinotto has teamed up with Cameroonian Florence Ayisi and the result is the observation of two children and two women, all of whom

take individual cases including rape, domestic violence and child slavery to state prosecutor Vera. "It's about four strong people who try to change their lives," she says.

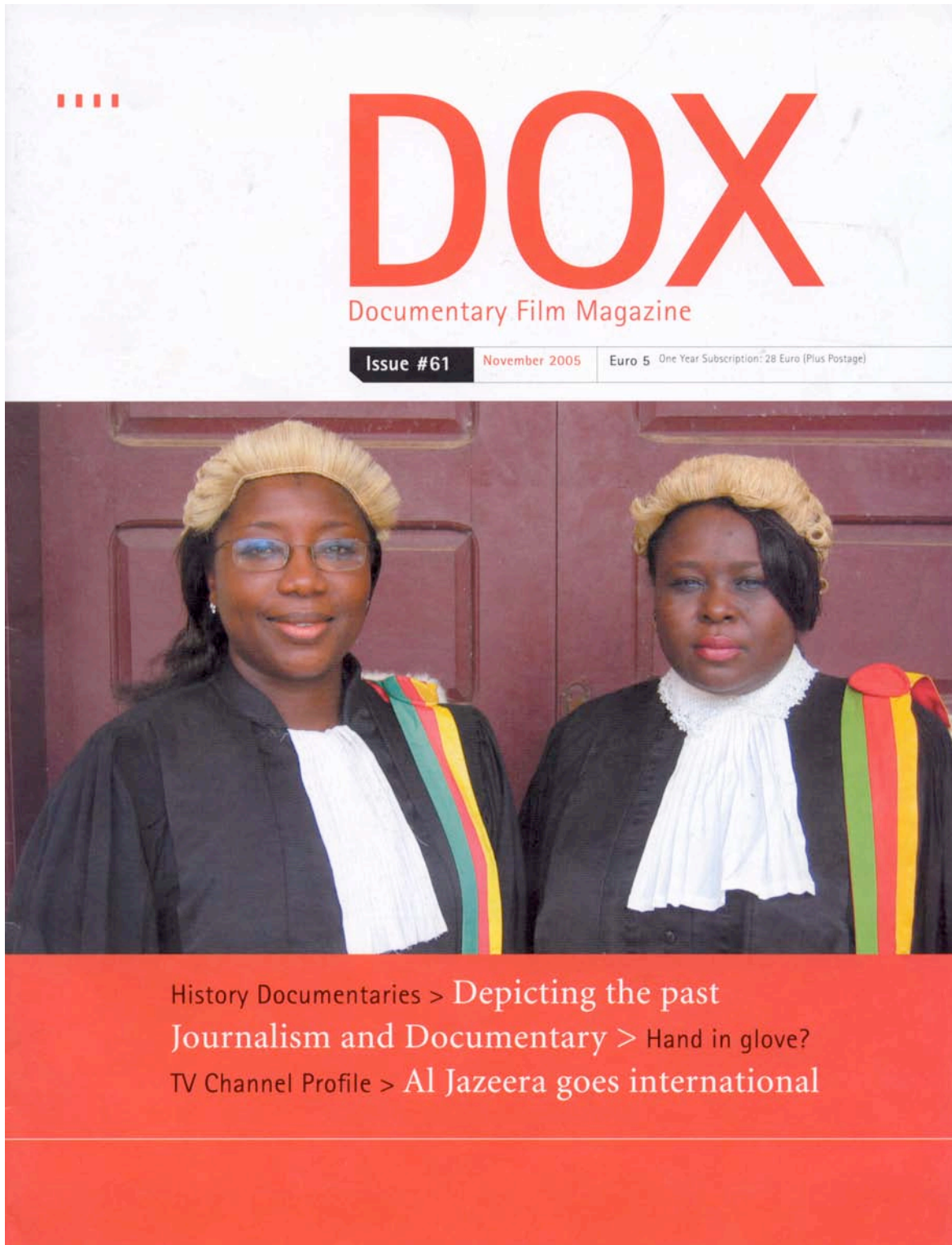
In spite of experiencing numerous setbacks during filming — including contracting typhoid and malaria — Longinotto is determined to "make just one more African film".

So if this film sells well following its Cannes push, what will she do with the proceeds? "I really want to set up something nice in Kenya or Cameroon, something that directly benefits real women," she explains.



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DOX

Reviews

Sisters in Law

UK 2005, 104 min.

Directors: Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi
Production: Vixen Films
World Sales: Vixen Films
Tel: +44 207 359 7368
tg@tgraham.demon.co.uk

Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi's documentary *Sisters in Law* is a fascinating insight into the workings of the judicial system in the small African town of Kumba in southwest Cameroon. The 'sisters' of the title refers to State Prosecutor Vera Ngassa and Judge Beatrice Ntuba, a formidable duo who relentlessly take on any wrongdoing in the area, in particular male violence against women. Outspoken and determined, they hold short shrift with bullies and liars, as we witness through their day-to-day handling of the cases brought before them, following several – fly-on-the-wall – sequences from initial claim to subsequent sentencing in court.

We see Manka, a young girl who was repeatedly beaten by her aunt; Sonita who claims she was raped by her neighbour; and



Amina who wants a divorce after being subjected to beatings by her husband. All are women who in a previous era would have been shouted down for speaking out against figures of 'authority', or worse, would have been horribly punished. But with Ngassa and Ntuba to inspire and protect them, and the knowledge that justice might prevail, each feels that they can now safely stand up for their rights. The balance of power is shifting and the assertion that 'men and woman are equal in rights in our country' holds some truth.

Masterfully edited by Ollie Huddleston to create an absorbing but measured pace, the roving style of the camera perfectly suits the action of the film as it shifts between office, courtroom, village house and road. Eschewing the pomp and circumstance of much more familiar courts, sentencing rarely seems to hinge on physical evidence or witness corroboration, but almost always on a victim's word, the scars on a body or an eventual confession from the perpetrator of the crime so skilfully extracted by the redoubtable pair. The direct manner of their questioning is often very funny, and their infectious optimism infuses the film with a welcome levity and humanity; despite the inexcusable nature of the felonies, the scenes depicted are never gratuitous or salacious.

With such resilience on show, the lingering feeling of *Sisters in Law* is absolutely one of hope: with enough courage and the right support network in place, victims can overcome the harshest of circumstances and see their oppressors appropriately punished. When Amina and Ladi, two Muslim women, are awarded convictions for spousal abuse – the first time this has occurred in seventeen years – the joy and amazement of the other villagers speak volumes. It's a moving testament to the power of education and the enforcement of women's rights, and a welcome portrait of an Africa that is rarely represented by the media in such a positive light.

Hannah Patterson

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Funded in part by EU's Media Programme



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