



Sisters in Law



A film by Florence Ayisi and Kim Longinotto



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

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Synopsis



The only documentary selected for the 2005 Directors' Fortnight in Cannes and a selection of the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival, *SISTERS IN LAW* is the latest film from internationally acclaimed director and festival favorite Kim Longinotto, co-directed by Florence Ayisi. Longinotto's award-winning films include the 2005 Emmy-nominated film *THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET*, which premiered in the U.S. at the 2003 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. The tough-minded state prosecutor Vera Ngassa and court president Beatrice Ntuba are helping 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*, *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. Both insightful and uplifting, *SISTERS IN LAW* presents a rare strong and positive view of African women—and captures the emerging spirit of courage, hope and possibility for change.



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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

Downloadable Photos available at

www.wmm.com/sistersinlaw

For more information contact:

Christie George

cgeorge@wmm.com

Tel (212) 925 0606 #317

Fax (212) 925 2052

Publicity Contact:

Cindy Kridle, Marketing and Communications Manager

ckridle@wmm.com



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Filmmaker Biographies

Director/Producer Kim Longinotto



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 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 at the 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 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 domestically at Sundance in 2003. Her film **SISTERS IN LAW**, set in Cameroon, premiered and won two prizes at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival. She is currently researching a new film in Africa.



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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Selected Filmography: Kim Longinotto

The Day I Will Never Forget (2002)

THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET is a gripping feature documentary that examines the practice of female genital mutilation in Kenya and the pioneering African women who are bravely reversing the tradition. In this epic work, women speak candidly about the practice and explain its cultural significance within Kenyan society. From gripping testimonials by young women who share the painful aftermath of their trauma to interviews with elderly matriarchs who stubbornly stand behind the practice, Longinotto paints a complex portrait of the current polemics and conflicts that have allowed this procedure to exist well into modern times.



Demystifying the African tradition of female circumcision, Longinotto presents Nurse Fardhosa, a woman who is single-handedly reversing the ritual of female circumcision one village at a time by educating communities about its lasting emotional and physical scars. Also profiled is an inspiring group of runaway girls who are seeking a court injunction to stop their parents from forcing them to go through with the practice. Through their words the full implications of breaking with tradition are made clear, as is the incredible courage of the women and girls who risk social ostracism by taking a stand against the practice.

- 2005 Emmy Nominee
- Sundance Film Festival
- IDFA, Int'l Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam - Amnesty International DOEN Award
- San Francisco International Film Festival
- Hot Docs Documentary Film Festival - Best Documentary UK Spotlight
- WIN Award for Best Documentary Film
- Barcelona Human Rights International Film Festival - Special Mention
- Festival International de Films de Femmes de Creteil - Best Documentary
- Viewpoint Documentary Film Festival - Best Film
- New Directors New Films

Runaway (2001)



"In the middle of the night a big man came into my room. There was nothing I could do. I'm an eighteen-year-old girl, how could I fight a strong man? He did it to me several times. When I came out I saw my father sitting in the corner, he was smoking and he was drunk... My father hit me in the face, I'll never forget it. He said that if I loved him I'd put up with it - my mother and sister had to... I used to tell myself, 'This is my father, I have to rely on him, he can help me.' But he didn't, instead he forced me into a life of misery and darkness." (Satareh, a teenage runaway) Satareh is one of five Iranian girls whose lives we encounter in the extraordinary film RUNAWAY, made in collaboration with Ziba Mir-Hosseini, with whom Longinotto collaborated for the remarkable DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE. It is filmed in a refuge in Tehran, where girls come in an attempt to escape the abuse and intolerable restrictions they suffer at home. Satareh's story is more extreme

than others, but beatings are commonplace, and girls generally have few rights or freedoms. The refuge provides them with a place of safety in which to receive support from the staff and from one another, while they decide on their next move. Many of them do eventually return to their families, thanks to the determination and patience shown by Mrs Shirazi, who runs the shelter.

- IDFA Amsterdam – Joris Ivans Award Nomination
- Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema – Jury Prize for Best Documentary
- Osnabruck Film Festival – Children's Rights Award
- Zanzibar International Film Festival– Silver Dhow Award
- Chicago International Film Festival
- Edinburgh International Film Festival
- Margaret Mead Film Festival
- Sheffield Documentary Film Festival
- Hot Docs Canadian Documentary Film Festival
- Munich International Documentary Film Festival



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Gaea Girls (2000)



"This fascinating film follows the physically grueling and mentally exhausting training regimen of several young wanna-be 'Gaea Girls', a group of Japanese women wrestlers. The idea of them may seem like a total oxymoron in a country where women are usually regarded as docile and subservient. However, in training and in the arena, the female wrestlers depicted in this film are just as violent as any member of the World Wrestling Federation, and the blood that's drawn is very real indeed. One recruit, Takeuchi, endures ritual humiliation not seen on screen since the boot camp sequences of 'Full Metal Jacket'. In 'Divorce Iranian Style', Kim Longinotto cinematically explored the previously unexplored world of the Tehran divorce courts. Working with co-director Jano Williams, Longinotto has been given access to shoot an insider's verite account of this closely guarded universe." - Chicago Film Festival

- *Chicago International Film Festival, Silver Hugo*
- *Toronto International Film Festival*
- *Berlin International Film Festival*
- *San Francisco International Film Festival*
- *Margaret Mead Film Festival*
- *Edinburgh International Film Festival, Best of Fest Section*
- *Sydney International Film Festival*
- *Sheffield Documentary Film Festival*
- *Auckland International Film Festival*

Divorce Iranian Style (1998)

Hilarious, tragic and stirring, this fly-on-the-wall look at several weeks in an Iranian divorce court provides a unique window into the intimate circumstances of Iranian women's lives. Following Jamileh, whose husband beats her; Ziba, a 16-year-old trying to divorce her 38 year-old husband; and Maryam, who is desperately fighting to gain custody of her daughters, this deadpan chronicle showcases the strength, ingenuity, and guile with which they confront biased laws, a Kafkaesque administrative system, and their husbands' and families' rage to gain divorces. With the barest of commentary, Longinotto turns her cameras on the court and lets it tell its own story. Dispelling images of Iran as a country of war, hostages, and "fatwas", and Iranian women as passive victims of a terrible system, this film is a subtle, fascinating look at women's lives in a country which is little known to most Americans.



- *Chicago International Film Festival, Silver Hugo Award*
- *San Francisco International Film Festival, Grand Prize for Best Doc*
- *Viewpoint Int'l Documentary Film Festival, Belgium, Best Doc*
- *Jerusalem Documentary Festival, Honorable Mention*
- *Sheffield Documentary Film Festival*
- *Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival*
- *Viennale International Film Festival*
- *Edinburgh Film Festival*



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Shinjuku Boys (1995)



SHINJUKU BOYS introduces three onnabes who work as hosts at the New Marilyn Club in Tokyo. Onnabes are women who live as men and have girlfriends, although they don't usually identify as lesbians. As the film follows them at home and on the job, all three talk frankly to the camera about their gender-bending lives, revealing their views about women, sex, transvestitism and lesbianism. Alternating with these illuminating interviews are fabulous sequences shot inside the Club, patronized almost exclusively by heterosexual women who have become disappointed with real men. This is a remarkable documentary about the complexity of female sexuality in Japan today.

- *Chicago Film Festival, Silver Hugo*
- *Houston Film Festival, Gold Prize*
- *San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, Outstanding Documentary*
- *London Film Festival*
- *New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*
- *Honolulu Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*
- *Sydney Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*

Dream Girls (1993)

This fascinating documentary, produced for the BBC, opens a door into the spectacular world of the Takarazuka Revue, a highly successful musical theater company in Japan. Each year, thousands of girls apply to enter the male-run Takarazuka Music School. The few who are accepted endure years of a highly disciplined and reclusive existence before they can join the Revue, choosing male or female roles. *Dream Girls* offers a compelling insight into gender and sexual identity and the contradictions experienced by Japanese women today.

- *Films de Femmes, Creteil, Best Documentary*
- *San Francisco Film Festival*
- *Jerusalem Film Festival*
- *New York London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*
- *Los Angeles Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*
- *San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*
- *London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*



Hidden Faces (1990)



Originally intended as a film about internationally renowned feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, *HIDDEN FACES* develops into a fascinating portrayal of Egyptian women's lives in Muslim society. In this collaborative documentary, Safaa Fathay, a young Egyptian woman living in Paris, returns home to interview the famed writer and activist, but becomes disillusioned with her. Illuminated by passages from El Saadawi's work, the film follows Fathay's journey to her family home and discovers similar complex frictions between modernity and tradition. Her mother's decision to return to the veil after twenty years and her cousins' clitoridectomies reveal a disturbing renewal of fundamentalism. This absorbing documentary broaches the contradictions of feminism in a Muslim environment; a startling, unforgettable picture of contemporary women in the Arab world.

- *Melbourne Film Festival, Best Documentary*
- *Films de Femmes, Creteil, France, Public Prize and Jury Special Mention*



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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 Longinotto 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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The Guardian

Wednesday May 18, 2005

by Geoffrey Macnab

Out et about

Directors' fortnight

Trials by fire

British documentary-maker **Kim Longinotto**'s film *Sisters in Law*, which deals with rape and divorce in Cameroon, screens in the Directors' Fortnight tomorrow. Here she explains its genesis:

"There's a scene in *Sisters in Law* that always makes me laugh in an embarrassed way. Amina, a Muslim woman in Cameroon, is trying to divorce her husband. The [woman] judge says to her: "All men are brutal." You think at that moment that the world is two halves - men versus women - and we're in the women's half. Amina's case was first successful conviction in Cameroon for spousal abuse. "She's going against everyone; all her family are telling her to stop. She's fighting for her life, as she sees it. In that situation, I suspect she really appreciates having us in the courtroom alongside her."

Our other main character, Sonita, is standing up for herself too. She's a nine-year-old girl who is testifying that her neighbour raped her. It's a very brave thing for a little girl to do, especially as the accused was trying to intimidate her while she was giving evidence. I admired the way the judge and prosecutor - both women - dealt with the situation. They made it very unthreatening for her, helping her to speak out. They are judges and prosecutors, but are also very female about it. I kept thinking of Victoria Climbié - I wish somebody had talked to her the way those two women did.

We finished making *Sisters in Law* a few months ago, and it was originally supposed to be shown on TV in March. But Peter Dale, our commissioning editor, wanted to hold it back and that gave us a chance for Cannes. For me, it's exciting when a film is in a cinema. It's so different seeing it on the big screen. I've always loved the idea of people watching it together. It was always our dream to have [my 1998 film] *Divorce Iranian Style* shown in the local cinema of the woman concerned. Cinemas are the one place in Iran where men and women can sit together. But it hasn't happened yet.



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