

# Sisters in Law

Cameroon / UK | 2005 | 86 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Florence Ayisi / Kim Longinotto
<b>Photography</b>	Kim Longinotto
<b>Music</b>	D'Gary
<b>Editing</b>	Oliver Huddleston

## In Brief

Longinotto's "affirmative and inspiring" (Sight & Sound) film follows the daily activities of Vera Ngassa and Beatrice Ntuba, two ladies who fight for justice for women of all ages in a predominantly Muslim village in Cameroon. Despite some of the focus falling on cases that involve some truly disturbing allegations, the film is not without humour and for all the hardships documented, it remains a warm, often witty and ultimately uplifting examination of two courageous and special people.

## The Tie That Should Not Bind by Donald Levit

The punningly titled *Sisters in Law* advertises its "unobtrusive camera" yet in the same breath touts itself as "a cross between Judge Judy and The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series." Despite the latter unfortunate if partly true claim, and although the non-professional, real-life participants are aware they are being recorded and cinema audiences will know that editing and selection have intervened, the film gets one on its side and rooting for the verdicts and overdue changes that ought to be the outcome.

Originally set to be aired first on TV, where the small screen would have not been as friendly to the moving jumpy camerawork and Ollie Huddleston's editing, this documentary has won prizes at scores of festivals. U.K. co-directors and -writers Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi have selected four examples out of who knows how many, to support their thesis that the times they are a-changin' in an Africa that ten weeks ago swore in its first-ever elected female head of state in Liberia's Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

Here the country is the Republic of Cameroon, where the hump of Africa veers south five degrees distant from the Equator; the village is southwestern Kumba Town, a hundred twenty-five thousand inhabitants; and the venue is the basic ochre stone courthouse where two women are doing "man's work" to end traditional miscarriages of justice.

In their personal Western dress or symbolically bewigged in the black robes of European judicial systems, they are Prosecutor-lawyer Vera Ngassa and Court President-judge Beatrice Ntuba. Amidst unsanitary unromanticized Third World poverty, dirt roads and corrugated-roof shacks, they are clear-sighted no-nonsense, mixed with compassion and barbed humor that strip away community pretense to expose truth and espouse that "men and women are equal in rights in this country" in which a woman is often addressed as "sister."

Though one wishes in vain for background - where, in every sense, do these two come from? - that's not really the point, is it? In the Dickensian government building piled with dog-eared ledgers, cooled by floor and desk fans, and boasting one single computer that is not seen to function, dispensing justice goes back to grass roots, common sense, and verbal testimony unaided by the technology of television crime drama.

Education is what it's all about, in the end, in this country (and others) where illiterate barely pubescent female children are married off, or sold, by parents, and, previously accepting second-class citizenship as a matter of course, women now want the empowering enlightenment of school learning for their own daughters.

Having chosen this largely Muslim district, the filmmakers omit to inform us that this religion accounts for only one-sixth of the population (a third is Christian and half follow indigenous tribal beliefs) but are fair in including one heinous case in which the culprit is female, an aunt who essentially kidnaps her six-year-old niece Manka and mercilessly beats the child with a hanger. A second involves nine-year-old Sorita, tied up and raped in the shack of an illegal Nigerian immigrant neighbor. Justice is not bloodthirsty but is appropriately stern, as both these offenders are sent to hard labor in prison followed, in the latter case, by "repatriation" to his country of origin.

The third and fourth concern wives Amina and Ladi, treated abysmally and beaten into repeated sex with violent husbands. Amina's is really the showcase case, as she becomes an inspiration for fellow Muslim townswomen when, counter to the community's male elders' advice and pooh-poohing, she brings her abusive mate before the law. In this society where females have traditionally been docile and treated as chattel for sex and childbearing and then cast off, she is awarded a divorce in the first such conviction of any husband in nearly two decades.

Menfolk favor drab cheap Western clothing, but, sartorially reversing mores, the women are splendid in gay robes and headdresses, and it is they who celebrate the victory and tell visiting Madam Ngassa that the future is now.

Mixing punishment with charity, fair but not vindictive, the "sisters in law" initiate and continue the slow necessary process of change. Done in English and subtitled Pidgin and Chadic Hausa, not stooping to preachiness or cheap sensationalism, *Sisters in Law* dignifies an Africa - particularly its women - elsewhere often shown as hopeless.



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## Interview with Kim Longinotto

by Rosie Saunders

**Rosie Saunders:** How was it to work with the striking main characters of *Sisters in Law*; Vera and Beatrice?

**Kim Longinotto:** It was extraordinary, I don't know if you get a sense of what Vera's like. In the film, she's very matter of fact and straightforward and no nonsense and that's exactly what she was like to film. You know after the first scene of the film where she's so supportive of the woman, she's so naturally democratic with that woman. I remember after they'd all gone out saying "God Vera I really like the way you talk to them" and she didn't want any praise or she didn't need any reassurance, she's just very straightforward and that's such a delight. I admired her a lot. I was a bit in awe of her to be absolutely honest. You know she'd be there at 6 in the morning and she'd go through the whole day without lunch. Just endless good humour and kindness and patience and you can't be like that for three months unless it's real, you can't put on a front like that. And no vanity you know. Most people if they're being filmed they like to know how they've done, or how the film's going or what you think or what. She never asked any questions about the film at all, she just did her job and I did my job.

**RS:** You worked with a co-director in this film, with Florence Ayisi, is that a method that you feel works for you?

**KL:** It's different with each film. I mean really how that second person works. In Iran I worked with Ziba on *Divorce Iranian Style* and that was a very, very close relationship, because it was in Farsi and I couldn't understand the language, and we worked really, really closely. She'd tell me when to start filming and we'd talk about what we'd filmed and it was kind of like we were doing it together. But with *Sisters in Law*, because most of it was in English, it wasn't such a close relationship. It's different in each film. What Florence was absolutely brilliant with was she arranged the hotels, the permissions to film, she arranged the car, so she did all that kind of stuff that I mean I just couldn't have done it without her. There's no way we could have made that film without somebody knowing the place to start with and introducing us to people and all that so I suppose in each film it's a different role. The film was made very much with Mary and I, we did a lot of it just the two of us.

### Divorce Iranian Style

**RS:** You seem to use a similar structure in other of your films: in *Divorce Iranian Style* for example.

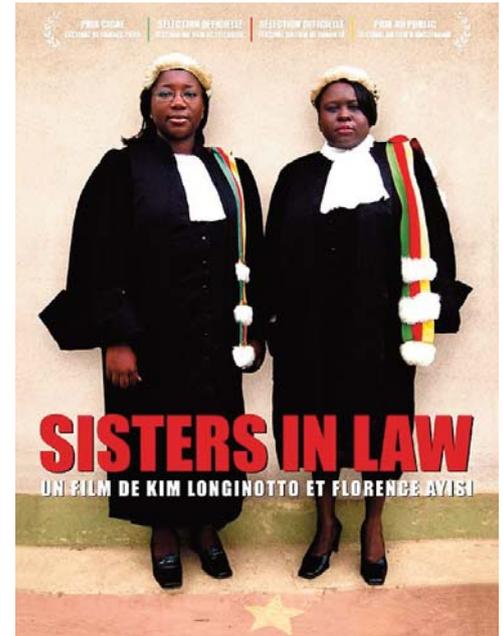
**KL:** Yes it's exactly the same. There's a woman who has been with a man for 30 years and not allowed to pick up the phone. That's very much saying: this is the old way that women put up with things, she's been living with him for 30 years, this is the kind of life she had and from now on it's going to be younger women who are challenging. So it's very much the same basic model, you find your basic theme to set it up with and then you go into the chronology and then go into proper stories. If you look at *Sisters in Law* and *Divorce Iranian Style* they're very, very similar. They've both got 3 or 4 main cases that run through.

**RS:** The way you use commentary in the two films is quite different.

**KL:** I really didn't want to use any commentary in *Divorce*... but there were certain things that I absolutely had to put in because people wouldn't know what it was. That was like the stuff relating to the Marier – the dowry; I had to explain what would happen with the dowry. I had to put that in because otherwise you wouldn't understand what Ziba, the little girl, was fighting for because she has this fight about keeping her dowry but she wants a divorce which you're not meant to do. A dowry is meant to be a bargaining tool to get your divorce so she was breaking all the rules and I don't think people would have understood what that scene was about so with *Divorce*... there were little bits of information that we felt people absolutely had to have to get to understand what was happening to otherwise it could be a bit frustrating. Also to tell you who the people were and what their roles were. Whereas in *Sisters in Law* we did this with titles: state prosecutor and judge because they were so similar to what the roles are here we felt didn't need much explaining. I suppose because the society was closer to this I didn't feel we needed any explanation of it.

**RS:** Has any of the controversial subject matter of your films lead you to be attacked or refused access for future productions?

**KL:** In all these films really the people who are really in danger are the people in the films. They're the really brave people for example Amina who is taking her husband to court, she's the first woman to do it and he's living two doors down from her, all her family are against her and you know she was terrified, everyone's against her and if she loses she's sent back and she thinks she's going to get killed. So they're the brave people. In the film I made before, *The Day I'll Never Forget*, these young girls are taking their families to court. They're actually living with them while the cases are going through. I can't even imagine for a minute what it must be like to take your father to court and then to live with him. So I think that they're the people that really put themselves out on a limb and they've got to live with the consequences of what they're doing.



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**RS:** You show this very well in Sisters in Law when you go back to see Amina with Vera.

**KL:** Yes, and they're so proud of her. It's quite amazing because they are really able to support her then because she's won, she had the law behind her, because before that nobody really was prepared to stand up and support her.

**RS:** Vera also goes to the jail to visit Rose [who is a found guilty of abusing 6yr old Manka] and to make sure she's got her prescription.

**KL:** I love that scene, because up until that moment that woman has been such a monster, it's like in this country how we see paedophiles in the press, an awful nightmare woman. But then when you see her there and Vera says 'look, we don't hate you' and she cries you suddenly think god, she's a victim herself, she's crying because she's shown a little bit of kindness. So the little bit of kindness she gets is what triggers her into crying for real. That really moved me because it made me realise that this woman is just as damaged as Manka is. I think it makes you see what an amazing woman Vera is because I can't think of any judges in this country who would visit a jail to make sure the woman she's just sent there has got a prescription. That's a pretty extraordinary thing to do really. Really following it through, you know doing it for the right reasons, not doing it for power but really thinking that she's making her community a better place. There's no retribution in it, it's all about healing which is extraordinary.

**RS:** In terms of themes women's issues run through all your films, is that an important part of your work?

**KL:** It's a funny question really and a funny answer because if you think about what men make films about, I mean most films are about men really. Did you see The Boy who played on the Buddhas of Bamiyan? I remember seeing that and being really amazed afterwards because Phil Grabsky [the director] was there and everyone was asking questions and nobody asked him anything about why he only filmed the men. It just didn't occur to people to say why did you only film the men. I think in a way it's this last little hang up, that we always expect men to be the main characters. It's weird, people always notice that I film women, even though in Sisters in Law you've got Stephen who's quite a big character, who saves Manka, and you've got the wonderful lawyer who's a scoundrel and then you've got the husband, but they always see it as a film about women. Which it is. But nobody sees The Boy who Plays on the Buddhas of Bamiyan as about men because they just assume...



I remember being really shocked because there's a little girl in The Boy who played on the Buddhas... there's a man who has married off his daughter so he can get a second wife. It's like a bargaining thing, a bit like the woman in Sisters in Law, and she's always being told to get back into the cave, you never really see her and she's really, really young she looks about 12 and she's got a baby. None of that surprised me because I thought he doesn't want to film the sister that's fine. I would have made it about the sister and the mother, obviously that would have been who I would have been interested in, but then everyone would have asked 'why did you concentrate on the women?'

**RS:** The claim is often made that in many circumstances that as a man access to women is difficult. If you want to study men you have to be a man and if you want to study women you have to be a woman. Do you think that could be the case?

**KL:** There is a bit of truth in that, it would have been very hard for Phil to have gone into the cave on his own and film the little girl, he would have needed a woman there for him to do that, just because it seemed like a very rigid society. Whereas Divorce... could never have been filmed by a man. They wouldn't have got access, for example to the bit when I film the women taking their make up off; they wouldn't have felt comfortable with a man.

What annoyed me really was that at the end of the film, you see the boy, his name and what has happened to him, you see about the father, you see about the mother but the little girl doesn't even get a name. So she was completely faceless and powerless and I suppose the only answer to that is not to be annoyed or anything, but that we should go and do them ourselves. I know what he [the director] would say, and I would respect him for it, that he really probably couldn't get access to her, she was being told to get back into the cave so that he wouldn't see her. I mean she must have had a terrible life, she was always in the cave. At least the little boy was out and going to school. She didn't go to school or anything she was there just to have babies, she's a bit like a veal calf or something.

And I just thought I'm so glad that I'm making films because I'm giving those little girls names and I'm filming the little girls. Really, I'm just balancing it a tiny bit, but nobody sees it like that. It's strange isn't it?

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