

# [To deal with issues that do not](https://assignbuster.com/to-deal-with-issues-that-do-not/)

Towhat extent do the films of Kim Longinotto succeed in representing women asagents of social and political change, rather than as victims? Thisessay will discuss the extent to which the films of British documentaryfilmmaker, Kim Longinotto succeeds in representing the women in her films asagents of social and political change, rather than as victims. The essay willanalyse three of Longinotto’s films: Divorce Iranian Style (Iran/UK, 1998), TheDay I Will Never Forget (Kenya/UK, 2002), and Sisters in Law (Cameroon/UK, 2005). KimLonginotto employs an observational, unobtrusive style of filmmaking, focusingmainly on women from different cultures, many of whom are marginalised anddisenfranchised by the cultural traditions and religious laws that govern them.

Longinotto’s films share many characteristics of other observational, directcinema films, including a lack of interviews, little narration, anduncomplicated camera work. She also fosters a close relationship between thefilmmaker, the subject, and the audience, to create a sense of realism andintimacy. However, despite Longinotto’s similarities to the direct cinemastyle, she does not simply remain a silent observer, or an ‘ outsider’, insteadshe seeks change, hope, and progress through her films. As Belinda Smaill putsit, “ rather than simply depicting difficult situations, the central thread ofthese documentary narratives is hopefulness and the ideal of female culturalagency” (2007: 177)  Thefact that Longinotto often tackles issues in non-western cultures where thewomen she films deal with issues that do not affect the majority of her westernaudience, means that she runs the risk of representing these women as victims, as the exotic ‘ other’, or of her films appearing voyeuristic. However, Longinotto manages to avoid this representation in a number of ways that thisessay will explore. Belinda Smaill describes Longinotto’s camera as locating” the cultural “ other” as not outside of, but entrenched in, the complexparadigms of modernity”.

She goes on to say that, “ Longinotto necessarilyrenders the emotional and physical pain of marginality and individual agency, drawing attention to the relationship between pain – along with its representation– and political struggle” (2009: 45).  Divorce Iranian Style depicts a family courtin Tehran, where people go to attempt to settle issues with their divorces. Thecontrast between the way men and women are treated is evident from thebeginning of the film.

Longinotto uses an English-speaking narrator sparinglyand only when absolutely necessary. The narrator explains that men and womenuse separate entrances, men are searched for weapons, while women are inspectedby the court’s staff to ensure their appearance and attire is in line withIslamic dress code guidelines for women. One woman is told to remove hermake-up while others are lent chadors to further cover themselves.  Itbecomes clear that men can seek a divorce without reason, whereas if a womanwants a divorce she must prove that her husband cannot father a child, isinsane, or has deceived her. These are the only grounds on which a woman canseek a divorce.

WhatLonginotto tackles in Divorce IranianStyle is the complex relationship between the traditional Islamic laws ofthe country and the increasing modernity of contemporary Iranian society. Morespecifically, she explores the ways in which the women in the film struggle tonavigate their way through a patriarchal system that grants them such limitedpower. Longniotto uses a clever juxtaposition of shots to translate thismeaning to her audience. As Lindsey Moore explains, “ The informing discourse of the film isfurther revealed through the juxtaposition of court scenes with those in themosque at prayer time and with shots outside, in which the late AyatollahKhomeini’sportrait looms largeon a billboard, thus linking religion, politics, the law, and patriarchaldominance”.

(2005: 24) Moore quotesMir-Hosseini, Longinotto’s Iranian co-director, on their vision for the film,” we tried to focus on commonalities rather than on the exotic and thedifferent, to remind the viewer that marriage is a difficult institution . . . togive glimpses into the lives of ordinary people. Above all, we wanted to letthe women speak, to show them as individuals” (2005: 22)   Longinotto andMir-Hosseini succeed in their representation of women as individuals, and, toan extent, as agents of social and political change. One of the film’scharacters is Ziba, a16-year-old girl who was married off by her parents to a much older man whenshe was 15. She wants to divorce her husband, who she accuses of being violent, and to go back to school.

The lack of power Ziba has fosters a desperation andhunger for change in her, and the other women in the film. Longinotto shows howthis desperation manifests itself: in almost every scene of the film theaudience see the womenin the film assertively engaging with the judge at the court. They argue, negotiate, and fight their way their way through a system that is workingagainst them. Moore elaborates on this,  “ Women across thesocial spectrum are shown actively to participate in contemporary debates ongendered rights in Islamic Iran. Women are not revealed as hopelessly oppressedbut as an articulate force.

The final voice-over, superimposed on the face ofeach of the main characters in slow motion, indicates that all have achievedsome degree of success in their dealings with the court” (2005: 23) However, Moore also arguesthat Longniotto does not entirely avoid presenting the women in the film asvictims or as the exotic ‘ other’. She describes a scene that “ does notaltogether resist voyeurism” (2005: 24) wherea woman attempts to shield herself from the camera with her face veil. Thecamera, however, remains focused on her veiled face. The Day I Will NeverForget exploresthe practice of female genital mutilation in Somali communities in Kenya. Unlike in Divorce Iranian Style, butin keeping with the narrative of most of her other films, Longniotto chooses a strong female character that acts as anadvocate for the other women in the film.

As with Sisters in Law and some of Longinotto’s other films, these characters represent strength, power, hope, and social and political progress. Fardohsa Ali Mohamed is thischaracter in The Day I Will Never Forget. Having undergone FGM herself as a child, Fardohsa is a nurse who campaignsto change attitudes to FGM in Kenya. She offers a surgical procedure to women whohave gone through FGM that allows for less painful sex and childbirth, and alsolowers the risks of infection associated with both. Aswith many of her films, Longniotto wanted to make a film about the struggle tochange tradition, more specifically women’s struggle to change tradition, traditionthat is in place for the satisfaction and convenience of men. As she puts it inan interview with Belinda Smaill, “ tradition always impacts on women…that’swhat annoys me, when people go on about how wonderful tradition is, because itis always instigated by men and it is always for the benefit of men”.

(Smaill, 2007: 186)  Aswith Divorce Iranian Style, The Day IWill Never Forget is an observational film. Longniotto uses minimalvoice-over, only where absolutely necessary, and few interviews. The film couldbe said to take a cinema verite approach, as, rather than doing interviews, Longinotto facilitates discussions about FGM between a diverse range of womeninvolved in the procedure, including young women who’ve undergone it and femalevillage elders who work as circumcisers. These discussions reveal to theaudience just how much cultural pressure there is for young girls to becircumcised. They also show just how misinformed some of the village elders areabout FGM. One of the elders tells some of the younger women that it does nothurt and that is a good experience.

Another claims that after circumcision womennot longer have any sexual desire for men. WhileFardohsa is clearly represented as an agent for social and political change, not all the women in the film are represented this way. As with Divorce Iranian Style, Longniotto tacklesthe issue of the struggle between tradition, the emerging contemporary society, and a westernised legal system. This is often portrayed in the context of olderwomen (traditional) versus young women (contemporary). Smaill says, “ While many of the women in The Day I Will Never Forget are depicted as struggling with theweight of cultural expectation…these women are juxtaposed with women likeFardohsa who work within the confines of the culture to effect change. The Day I Will Never Forget brings tolight the misinformation and attitudes that perpetuate FGC.

This casts somesubjects, such as the female elders who perform the practice, as simplistic andperhaps even ignorant of the trauma they inflict and why. In stark contrastFardohsa is associated with the discourses of medicine and science”.  Isit possible that through Longinotto’s portrayal of the ignorance of the elders, that they are represented as victims of this “ primitive” African tradition? It’s possible that Longinotto represents them in this way to avoid them beingdepicted as perpetrators, as many of them are circumcisers.

Is it easier toportray them as old women who don’t know any better and are simply followingtradition?  Longinottosucceeds, however, in representing the younger generation as agents of socialand political change. This, in turn, may eventually succeed in changing theattitudes of the older women. The second half of the film focuses on sixteen girlswho take their parents to court to prevent them from circumcising them. Theywin their case. This is a hugely empowering moment in the film. These girls donot just win the rights to their own bodies, they also effect change throughoutthe community, make older women question the practice, and protect futuregenerations.

Longniotto says in an interview with Catherine Fowler, “ Ilove the way the mothers come out absolutely beaming; they’ve shifted, thedaughters have taken over something that maybe the mothers would have wanted. The girls have changed the whole premise of everything; they’re saying, wedon’t want to get married, we want to stay at school and we don’t want to haveloads of babies. All the mothers can do is stand and watch and be reallyimpressed, and the fathers can be angry. I don’t really see it as a film aboutFGM. I see it as a film about girls changing their lives, a film about changeand rebellion really”. (2004: 103) Longniotto’sdecision to include a distressing scene depicting two young girls undergoingFGM was borne out of a desire to effect change, not just by Longinotto herself, but also by Fardohsa and some of the girls in the film.

In Smaill’s interviewLonginotto recalls one of the girls saying, “ you have to have that scene inbecause how are we going to change unless our fathers and brothers see the kindof horror of it” (2007: 184) Sisters in Law, Longniotto’s second filmset in Africa, again focuses on the struggle between tradition, religious law, and a westernised legal system. Set in the town of Kumba in Cameroon, Longniotto again frames the film around a strong female character thatrepresents power, hope, strength, and, in the case of this film, realauthority. State prosecutor Vera Ngassa and court president Beatrice Ntuba arein charge of Kumba’s court. They are well respected in the area and thesurrounding villages. This becomes evident to the audience in the film’s veryfirst scene. A woman comes into Vera’s office with her young child, her estrangedhusband and her father. The woman’s father has given her child to her husbandand the woman is trying to get the child back.

Vera chastises the father, saying, “ your daughter has become merchandise. What is a woman to you? 80, 000 Francsand a pig? That’s what you men do. You just harvest children all over the placewithout marrying the mothers”. Longniottojuxtaposes several different cases throughout the film, including a 10-year-oldrape victim, a six-year-old abuse victim, and the case of Amina, a woman who isseeking a divorce from an abusive husband.

This juxtaposition gives the filmreal emotional power, enabling the audience to really engage and connect withthe film. Longniotto says in her interview with Smaill, that she wants “ toallow to the audience to make a sort of leap where they can feel what theperson in the film is feeling, through cultures” (2007: 181) Thereis a certain ease in representing the charismatic, passionate Vera as an agentof social and political change. It is clear that she is of a higher social classthan most of her plaintiffs: she speaks fluent English and holds a high-leveljob. This has afforded her rights that the female plaintiffs in the film do nothave, for example an education, therefore power, and the chance to gain a jobin authority. Class is not a topic that is really examined in the film, butthis is in keeping with Longniotto’s observational style. She avoidsspoon-feeding her audience and lets them find their own meaning in her films. Vera and Beatrice’s social standing and language skills also allow Longniottoto make Sisters in Law a strictlyobservational film.

She would not have been able to employ such an unobtrusivestyle to the film had it not been for Vera and Beatrice. She would have had totranslate many of the subjects’ native language, Pidgin, and possibly use voiceover to explain parts of the court system. Longinotto, however, still manages to avoid representing the female plaintiffs in the filmas victims, and, in fact the strength of her subjects is evident in all herscenes. Longniotto’s representation of Amina, the woman seeking a divorce, isone of determination and strength. Witnesses are constantly discrediting herand her entire village is against her. Yet, with the support of Vera andBeatrice she does not give up and she is eventually granted her divorce. At theend of the film the audience learn that this was the first time in seventeenyears that a woman had won the right to divorce her husband on the grounds ofabuse. Smaill says: “ Leaving this revelation until the end of thefilm, Longniotto places a final emphasis on the changes inaugurated by thefemale officials and their work to enfranchise women and children” (2009: 58) Longniottoalso shows how Amina herself empowers change in other women.

After she returnsfrom court, there is a scene where Amina is celebrating with her femalefriends. They say to her, “ you’ve opened our eyes; we’ve been suffering insilence.” White says of this scene: “ Thuseven women who are not directly involved are transformed, through the double” truth-telling” processes of documentary witnessing and court testimony, to theextent that they themselves become advocates” (2006: 124) Theaccess granted to Longinotto allows for a rounded representation of hersubjects. The relationships she builds with her subjects and other local womenwho help her make her films give her the chance to film in places she would notusually have had access to, and therefore give her the chance to represent the’whole’ person. Towards the end of Sistersin Law there is a scene with Lum Rose, the aunt convicted of abusing hersix-year-old niece, in prison.

In an interview with Mayer, Longinotto explains,” it would have been impossible for us to have got permission to film there, andVera just swept us in with her. It was very much her making things happen andus filming it.” (2009: 113) Verasays to Lum Rose, “ we do not hate you” and offers to bring her medication toher. It is a softer side to Vera that the viewer sees now. This is in contrastto her righteousness and anger towards the defendants in court. It representsthe empathetic, human side to her. Longinotto’srepresentation of these two powerful, outspoken African women, runs the risk ofappearing voyeuristic to a western audience, in the sense that they may have atendency to sensationalise these women and react to them with a “ you go girl!” kind of attitude, as White puts it.

This is not the simplistic, patronisingreaction that Longniotto hoped to achieve from Sisters in Law. White highlights this by saying, “ Do North American audiences simply see barbaricAfrican men chastised and chastened by women’s over-the-top moralrighteousness, a “ you go girl” style of comeuppance?” (2006: 126) Longinotto’sobservational style also runs the risk of appearing voyeuristic. As with manyethnographic films with an observational style, Sisters in Law lacks cultural context. While this allows theaudience to have their own, individual reactions to the film, there is thepossibility that it may give them a simplistic view of the complicated legalsystem in Cameroon. White quotes a New York Times review of the film by NathanLee who says, “ Who are these women and can they please take over the worldsoon?” White goes on to say: “ Lee’s comment reflects a potential liability ofthe films limited contextualizing of what we see. Not knowing where these womencome from enables him to exaggerate and even gently mock their power. Whilewishing they could “ take over the world” is a wonderful clincher for thereview, it evokes the global at the expense of the local and the particularforms of women’s solidarity that the film takes such care to convey.

Is a lackof cultural specificity the price of the (art house) ticket?” (2006: 125) Despitethe risks of Sister in Law appearingvoyeuristic, Longniotto’s representation of the women in the film as agents ofsocial and political change is far more powerful. Longniotto goes further thansimply documenting this change and actually affects it. The film has been shownall over Africa by an African television station. In an interview with Mayer, Longniotto describes going to Cape Town to screen the film.

She says, “ Itwas amazing; lots of girls came up after and said, “ we’ve been raped and we’rereally proud that the little girl’s standing up in the film and confronting herrapist. We’ve never told anyone we’ve been raped, and we’re going to go homeand tell.” (2009: 117) Thefact that Longniotto’s film has the power to inspire the confidence in youngAfrican girls to speak up about rape and to, in turn, potentially open up adialogue about the subject, is a sign of immense social and political progressin Africa. Inconclusion, Longniotto’s choice to include certain scenes in her films, forexample, the scene of the two girls undergoing FGM in The Day I Will Never Forget, may be deemed sensationalist by somewestern viewers. This choice, coupled with Longniotto’s observational styleand, as a result, lack of context, may result in some western audiences viewingthe women in her films as victims or as the exotic ‘ other’.

However, as Smaillsays of Longniotto’s films,              “ They seek out the experiences andprocesses that position women as agents of social change. The relationships ofantagonism in which these female subjects are embedded also bring to light thenarratives of pain and injury that are, in some cases, part of theirexperiences” (2009: 61) Byleaving the scene in Longniotto creates a reaction, which in turn createsdialogue about FGM, which in turn begins to break down the taboo. Longniottoquotes one of the women who helped her with the film in an interview withFowler, “ She said that as soon as we start talking about it among ourselves wemight say we don’t want it done. You can’t do it to 100 girls against theirwill” (2009: 105) Longniottodescribes many people’s reactions to this scene in Fowler’s interview, “ Theysaid, ‘ Look, I’m really glad you showed it’ because part of the taboo is notlooking back to what it is, because it is torture and people say it’s culture” (2004: 105)  Longniotto’sfilms promote change within the countries in which they’re made. Both Divorce Iranian Style and The Day I will Never Forget have beenshown in Iran and Kenya respectively. Smaill describes the potential effectthis has on these cultures, “ The films potentially participate in thetransactions that take place between political groups within these cultures andthat alter social perceptions. Like her cinema of transaction, this activism isa shared project” (2009: 68) Perhapsthe most significant indicator of social and political change is the scene atthe end of Sisters in Law where Verais teaching a law class to a group of women. She introduces Amina to the classand tells them about her court victory, the first case of abuse by a spousethat had been won in seventeen years.

What this class of women represents ischange that does not end with Amina’s victory, but social and political changethat is on going and hopeful. Vera is the agent that has facilitated thischange. It is the same with the girls who take their parents to court and winthe rights not to be circumcised in TheDay I Will Never Forget.

Mayer quotes Longniotto in an interview,             “ The sixteen girls who jointogether…they’re changing their village from the inside out, so they’rechanging things in a bigger way” (2009: 112).