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Twins in search of justice

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Ilse and Femke van Velzen

Twin objective

Femke and Ilse van Velzen's *Justice for Sale*, which premieres at IDFA 2011, is the final film in a trilogy addressing the issue of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ilse van Velzen talks to Melanie Goodfellow about their extremely engaged filmmaking style.

It is mid-October and Femke and Ilse van Velzen have just returned to the Netherlands from a trip to the Congolese capital of Kinshasa to screen a rough-cut version of their latest film *Justice for Sale* at the Ministry of Justice.

"We also held a workshop where we showed the film to lawyers, judges, activists and NGOs working in the Congo," explains Ilse van Velzen.

For the identical twin filmmakers, who fell in love with the continent of Africa as 19-year-old students nearly a decade ago, the process of making a documentary goes far beyond the final cut.

***Justice for Sale* investigates the high levels of corruption** within the Congolese justice system through the case of Masamba, a soldier, who was unfairly convicted in 2008 of raping his captain's wife.

It is the final film in a trilogy of documentaries addressing the issue of rape in the Congo. The sisters first became interested in the subject while shooting their second documentary *Return to Angola*.

"In 2003, we visited refugee camps on the Angola-Congo border and heard some of the first stories about the rapes... at the time, the issue was not getting a lot of international attention," explains van Velzen.

The trilogy kicked off with *Fighting the Silence*, focused on female victims of sexual violence, followed by *Weapon of War*, which examined the subject from the perspective of the perpetrators.

Since the first film, the Congo's rape record has captured the world's attention and numerous international NGOs have set up local operations aimed at bringing rapists to justice.

The NGOs' eagerness to put perpetrators behind bars, however, can lead to further injustices, argues *Justice for Sale*.

Since the first film, the Congo's rape record has captured the world's attention

"While making *Weapon of War*, we spent four days filming public court hearings in September 2008 at which 10 soldiers were on trial, five to six of them on rape charges," says van Velzen. "There was a lot of commotion around Masamba's trial so we ended up paying special attention to it."

"We were astounded by the proceedings. No evidence was ever produced and yet he was convicted. The issue for us wasn't whether he was guilty or not but rather that he had not been given a fair trial... he went on to receive a ten year sentence."

"We screened our material to local lawyers and judges through a series of workshops to see what they thought of it and discovered it was not an isolated case... the suggestion was that money had

changed hands along the line somewhere," says van Velzen.

Through the workshops, the van Velzens met outspoken lawyer Claudine Tsongo who agreed to re-investigate the case. Despite uncovering several inconsistencies, Tsongo was unable to get the case re-opened.

The van Velzens are now hoping their film could help build a case for Masamba's conviction to be quashed, hence the screening at the Ministry of Justice in October.

"High-ranking military court judges present at the screening told us Masamba's case could be re-opened on the basis of the footage of the tribunal and with the support of a qualified lawyer," says van Velzen.

The documentary will also be the basis for a nationwide awareness campaign across the Congo against impunity and corruption within the legal system – which will include TV and radio ads as well as workshops informing people of their rights.

As with their previous productions, the sisters will take the feature on the road to communities across the Congo through their "mobile cinema" initiative which organises open-air screenings. The last such event attracted some 10,000 spectators.

Beyond this and perhaps most importantly for the sisters, they are hoping the film will bring about a shift-change in the way international NGOs tackle the issue of rape in the Congo.

"Now more and more NGOs are getting involved. They organise tribunals, pay the salaries of the judges and lawyers and present

the rape cases. The combination of intense pressure and money-flow make the tribunals even less independent," says van Velzen. "It's a bit of a taboo to discuss this but that's the reality."

"It would have been easier to make a film that would have been welcomed by the international NGO community, about how victims of rape are unable to put their perpetrators behind bars, but we feel that the accused also have the right to an honest trial – whether they're guilty or not," she adds.

"We make this point quite subtly part way through the film.... We plan to show *Justice for Sale* to policymakers and NGOs to generate a debate about this issue and together look for solutions."

Justice for Sale looks set to prompt some interesting discussions following its IDFA premiere in November.

Justice for Sale ◊ Directors: Femke van Velzen, Ilse van Velzen
Production: IFProductions Sales: Films Transit



Justice for Sale

Identical twins Femke and Ilse van Velzen, filmmakers and activists alike, talk to SEE NL about the final part of their trilogy addressing the issue of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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