

Documenting the Stories of Young Girls in Poverty: Bangla Surf Girls | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcript for the recorded webinar “Documenting the Stories of Young Girls in Poverty: Bangla Surf Girls” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on November 3, 2021, and was moderated by Prof. Andrea Paras. The guest speaker was documentary filmmaker Lalita Krishna.

Transcript:

Andrea Paras:

Hi! Good morning, everybody. Welcome. So, it's a minute past eleven so we'll get started. My name is Professor Andrea Paras I'm a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Guelph. It's my great pleasure to welcome you all and our special guest Lalita Krishna to this event.

This event is being hosted by CIRCLE which is the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement. CIRCLE was established in February 2020 at the University of Guelph. It's an interdisciplinary hub or nucleus in Canada, that focuses on cutting edge research on the Indian diaspora. CIRCLE showcases advocates catalyzes and fosters equitable respectful and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging and unexplored topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

But, we don't limit ourselves to India we're interested in things that happen in south Asia more broadly. So, it's a wonderful pleasure to invite, to welcome Lalita Krishna, who's going to be speaking about her most recent film which takes place in Bangladesh. I've just pasted a link to CIRCLE's website in the chat in case you're more interested in taking a look at CIRCLE.

So, as I mentioned today's guest is Lalita Krishna and I'll just provide a brief introduction to Lalita before we pass things over. Before I introduce Lalita I'll just tell you about the format of today's event. Lalita is going to be speaking for around 20 to 30 minutes, and then there will be a time for a Q & A, which I'll be facilitating. The event will end at 12 o'clock sharp.

Just while Lalita is speaking we'll ask you to remain on mute with your video off, but once it becomes time for the Q & A you can use the button to indicate that your hand is raised, or you can type your question into the chat, and we can, I'll read it out to the speaker. If you could keep your comments or questions quite brief so that we have enough time to get everybody's questions in. So that's the format of the event now about our distinguished guest Lalita Krishna.

Lalita is a multiple award-winning filmmaker whose work has been broadcast in Canada on all major networks and featured at film festivals around the world. She has helped to write, produce, or direct many documentaries, including “Untying the Knot,” “Return to Ryan's Well,”

and her most recent work, “Bangla Surf Girls,” which she'll be discussing today. She's the winner of numerous awards including the 2012 Trailblazer Award given by the real-world film festival, the 2013 Crystal Award for Mentorship, and most recently, the 2021 Don Hague award from Toronto's Hot Docs Film Festival.

This award is awarded to an outstanding independent film producer with a feature-length film showing at the festival. So, congratulations on that most recent award Lalita! Lalita is the co-chair of the board of North America's Premier Documentary Festival Hot Docs in Toronto and is the co-chair of Ontario's chapter of the documentary organization of Canada.

As I mentioned, Lalita will be discussing her most recent film, “Bangla Surf Girls,” today. This film has been shown at film festivals around the world over this past year. It's also been awarded several awards, it was the winner of the Women in Surf Award at the Portuguese Surf Festival, the Best Feature Film at the Oakville Festival of the Arts, and just two weeks ago was awarded the Best Feature Documentary at the Bushwick Film Festival in Brooklyn New York! So, congratulations again on that we're so excited that you are here with us. So, I'll pass things over to you, thank you so much Lalita.

Lalita Krishna:

Thank you, thank you Andrea for that really nice introduction. Hello everybody it's so nice to see such a full room. I guess I should start by wishing everybody a happy Diwali! Diwali which is the Indian Festival of Lights, is celebrated in many countries actually, and it is a celebratory event signifying the victory of good over evil which is kind of interesting mythology I guess for many cultures.

I'll give you a brief introduction about how I got to this point. So, as Andrea mentioned, I am a documentary filmmaker. I have been an independent documentary filmmaker and the way that works in Canada is that you pretty much work independently. We're not affiliated or associated with any agency or a broadcaster, but have to pre commit get out get a work pre-commissioned by in my case it's usually with the Canadian Broadcaster and from that point we screen at different festivals.

So, it's a kind of a in some way we are entrepreneurs because every time it's an adventure, we've got to pitch our stories, we've got to convince someone that it's worthy of support so that we can get some funding and financing in place. And the reason I mention this because all of my work has been done using that model, but not Bangla Surf Girls.

Bangla Surf Girls started really because I met the director and cinematographer Elizabeth D'Costa, who is a young emerging filmmaker in Bangladesh. We were making a different film for the CBC called, “Untying the Knot”. Which is a documentary about the horrific story of Ramana Monzur, the Bangladeshi Canadian who faced domestic violence, and had her eyes gouged out by her intimate partner. She came back to Canada, they tried to restore her eyesight. But then the documentary and her life is actually a remarkable recovery story.

It's a very empowering story of a woman who really fought, and today she's a lawyer in the BC courts, and she's an absolutely inspiring woman. If you haven't had a chance, I know that the Guelph Library has a copy of it. I would urge you to watch, especially this year, because it is National Month to eliminate racism... violence against women, this should be racism as well I guess, against everybody.

So, when we were filming "Untying the Knot" in Bangladesh, I met Elizabeth D'Costa and she told me about these young girls who when she was in Cox's Bazar, a beach, really absolutely stunning, the longest sandy beach in the world. She noticed young girls who usually peddle trinkets on the beaches.

You know we've all been to beaches in developing countries where you often see little kids coming around selling cold water called soft drinks and little beads and shells and trinkets. But then she found these girls, a whole bunch of them actually carrying surfboards and she sort of inquired further, and found out that these girls who used to sell trinkets had actually been recruited into a surf program and been motivated to join and they were learning surfing.

So, she got extremely curious, and then she found out some more. And she was telling me about this and said, "I really want to make a film about it, but I have no way how, I don't know how to go about it." So, I suggested to her that the first thing to do was to capture their images so that we could understand who these girls are. We can figure out if they articulate, can they emote on camera, and then let's try to pitch it and let's make this film come true, you know, come to life.

I just went full-fledged into it because for several years now leading up to Bangladesh my focus of all my work has been on women and children, international issues around the world. A lot of my work has taken me to the continent of Africa, I've traveled extensively in different countries, I've been to India, but I hadn't yet done a film in Bangladesh, which "Untying the Knot" was the first one.

I absolutely immediately gravitated to the people the culture. I am originally from India, but I was born in Calcutta, which is in West Bengal, they are an adjoining state to Bangladesh. They share a border, very similar cultures, same language, so I was able to immediately relate to it. That was my personal connection and desire but apart from that, when Elizabeth sent me the first set of footage I was completely taken up by these girls. They were initially shy, but I found that she had this ability to captivate them, and to gain their trust to get them to talk to her and to actually be themselves.

I mean ultimately our objective always is, at what stage can we let people forget that there's a camera around, that there's another presence around, and just be themselves. So, when I saw that footage, I said, "we just have to do this." So, I encouraged her to continue filming, and I said don't worry about it I'll raise the resources and find a way to get support. So that was my job then that's what producers do which is enable the director or the filmmaker to do their job so that it's ours. We take care of the business side of things, and that's what I felt I needed to do in this case.

So, Elizabeth just kept filming, and I kept raising money. As I said, this is not the model I usually work on. I usually have my financing in place before I get into a film, but for this particular film, I felt there's a momentum to it, it's happening before her eyes. Elizabeth had tremendous access, she's also so talented, and I felt it's going to be a hard one for us to raise money just purely because of the way our financing ecosystem works. I knew it's going to be hard so, I wrote a whole bunch for a whole bunch of grants, and just kept us going so that we could keep filming.

I took every opportunity to pitch this film. So, to me it was the story of, okay we'll follow these girls, there is going to be a competition, it's the usual story of "then one girl will enter the competition and she'll succeed and that'll be the end of our story". So, we start to have a beginning a middle and an end, and I thought okay fine we'll follow them for a year there's an end to this and that's great it's going to be the usual trajectory of how stories work.

We just found that when Elizabeth was immersed in their lives, as she gained their trust, and she was able to gain the family's trust, she went to places and she saw things that most people have never had access to gain. That kind and that level of intimacy that she was able to capture in her camera, and she kept sending that back. We were editing in Toronto, so I was working with my editor, and we were assembling these pieces together.

And a year down the road after we had started filming I kind of showed some of that footage to one of the broadcasters from BBC, and she turned around and said to me, "you know what you've got here," she said, "you've got a totally immersive documentary, you need to continue to stay with this whole process for as long as it takes. You have a local filmmaker, you have access to these girls, you've gained that trust."

I mean 12- and 13-year-old kids don't talk to people. We're all familiar with teenagers, and they're just like teenagers anywhere in the world. It's like yes, no, maybe. Their answers are clipped and incomplete but for them to be more non-stop, they were telling us what was going on, they were giving us their insights, they were able to provide some analysis. She said, "you've got something really incredible here. You just need to stay for the long haul."

I said, "okay, but the long haul is the competition and that's it." And we'll get to that point. But of course, that's not what happened. Then, as we were watching this, I suddenly realized what we're actually watching. We're a witness to a social experiment, almost that's happening on the ground we were seeing the power of an intervention like a sports program a surfing program which had, was giving these girls agency and control and independence and they were transforming in front of our eyes and we were actually witnessing that transformation.

And I realized that this is not just about a competition and then life goes on. This is really we're documenting all the complexity of poverty and their circumstances in which they live we are actually documenting the different challenges that are being thrown at them constantly but this is not just a simple solution for Rashed the trainer, I'm just going to assume that everybody has seen the film so I'm not going to explain the story. So, the trainer Rashed, had introduced this

program. He was smart enough to realize that the only barrier to their participation is economic.

That they cannot, their parents need them to work in the beach because they need income to be able to feed their families. If he was able to provide a way to feed that family, the parents would say, "yeah the girls are free to study and they can go and join the surfing program." So, he did a very sensible thing, their NGO or grassroots, you know, surf club really was set up in a manner where Rashed, who's married to this American woman who lives in California, Vanessa.

She was raising money in California through well-wishers. Surfer people who liked the stories of these girls wanted to support individual donations and that money was taken was sent back to Bangladesh. And what they were doing was getting food bags a month's food supply for the girls who participated in the program as long as they kept coming to the program.

And he had also he was also evolving as he went along, just trying to determine what the girls needed. He also insisted that they should go to school for half a day, and he was really a big figure in their lives in terms of identifying what they needed because their parents were not in a position to do that so these were the first generation of girls at this age who were actually going to school on a formal basis. And of course, the very first to participate in a surfing program, or being out in public and taking part in a sport.

So, he felt that as long as he kept giving the food back to the family the family would support the program or support the girls participating in the program, and they didn't really. There was a lot of social criticism, a lot of ostracism, and which you notice one of the parents he really continuously harasses the girls, abuse them physically, abuse the girls and his wife. And he kept talking about the surfing program being a blight in their lives, and that he cannot face society because of it, but he would say that, but he would still take the food back and continue to turn a blind eye.

But they would have to keep pretending that they were surfing in secret. Of course, he knew that, of course he would get into his rage every now and then and break all their trophies and he would do a lot of there was a lot of violence in that home. That was also something that we were able to get a lot of, purely by the stories of what the girls narrated to us.

So, when we witnessed this, we realized there were so many, I mean we never knew we'd go prepare to film one day and maybe there were eight girls in the program maybe six would show up and two wouldn't. Or some days you know it'd be four and four some days. And they were not just girl I mean they were boys too and they were not in any better circumstances, but this program was set up so that the girls got the support, the food bags.

The boys came and participated they got other support, but they didn't actually get the food bags because that was intended, I mean they were able to they didn't have enough money to raise, they didn't have enough funds to pay for food bags for everybody, but they did set them aside for the girls. Which is also a very unusual the sort of principle that Rashed worked on because he really wanted girls to take part in this.

So, we'd find on certain days when we go to film all set up we had planned you know Elizabeth and I had discussed what questions we're going to ask which direction we're going to go, we're going to spend the whole day with focus on this girl, we're going to do this one two three four things the girl wouldn't show up. And then, so Elizabeth it's not easy also by the way they live really, really, really far away.

So just to come to commute they would have to take transportation someone has to pay for that so the clubhouse was subsidizing some of that so Elizabeth went to their home and found that the girl Aisha in this case, that's how we got that scene with her, who said, "I'll come out with you, but my dad shouldn't know. I'll have to secretly go surfing because he shouldn't know that I've left." So, then Elizabeth said, "but what happened? You didn't show up yesterday."

She said, "I couldn't because there was a problem at home. My dad beat us up because he heard that I'd gone surfing." It didn't prevent her from doing it because she was, I mean she was rebelling against her dad. And she continued to do it, but she had to do it secretly, if he found out she knew she was going to get a beating and she did. And he also told her not to go to school because he believes that school is bad as well.

So these are some of the nuances that also we were capturing is complex it's really complex because they kind of understood these things are important for their girls, but they also felt that's evil because it's not our culture, this is not what our girls should be doing so they'd say both things. One they'd say this but they'd also say that.

But as the girls themselves gained that confidence, even just learning to stand on the surfboard which is like something that they were doing for themselves, you know you have to understand that no one has ever taken the time to teach these girls anything other than cooking home, domestic chores which they do from when they're six years old. No one had actually taken the trouble to say you know, "I'm going to teach you to ride a bike," or "I'm going to teach you to, you know, any kind of fun things... play soccer," because it's not considered important for girls.

And secondly, you know you start working the parent their mothers didn't do it they answered and do it their sisters didn't do it so why should they be different. So, the very act of standing on a surfboard the empowerment and the confidence that it gave them they suddenly began to feel well we can do anything. We can you know; we can overcome things.

And we were watching that happen so we actually, ended up documenting well the competition didn't happen that in any case I had mistakenly assumed that the competition was going to happen within that year, but it was the following year so that was already two years. And we stayed on for another year because the girl didn't go to the competition, but it was there was further developments in all their stories. So, what we have here is a very immersive documentation through you know audio and video over a span of three years in their lives.

Three years where we were constantly with them, we watched them evolve they were growing in front of us, maturing, learning, just getting wise. And we watched as well what happens with a social program, a local grassroots social program. I mean there are two things over here, one

is this program was successful because it was local, and because it was run by a local youth who understood the community understood the people understood the families this could not have been run by an NGO like Save The Children.

I mean Save The Children is great they do a great job but if they were running this program it would never ever have worked. It could work only because Rashed was so intimately connected with that community. He knew when he has to go in and, he knew exactly all the whole situation with Shobe, his passport he knew exactly who to speak to he goes to the authority he goes to this person he goes to that person and it was when he left the scene we saw what happened, everything collapsed. It took a leader, it took someone who, so it's not just a local person it has to be the right local person you know.

This is the other piece that we learned, and then we learned that if these local programs are so fragile, they are so dependent on western donations and contributions and you know the whole setup was so it was just, you know, they were depending on GoFundMe. You know crowdfunding sources because the money they needed was so limp it's so small it was just so little actually in the scheme of things to bring about such a big change.

I mean when you look at it, I mean to me this was like why isn't anyone else getting it this is such a simple intervention this is so and it was so obvious and we were watching this whole thing happen in play before our eyes and we and you know that's what I kept telling people. I met people from you know in the course of other things, like in the social events and everything, I met someone from World Bank and I was telling them about the story and of course he went, "this is so important I think we should document it."

I spoke to Ford Foundation and I told them you guys should be watching something that like this and we've documented it you can see within this documentary exactly how it plays out and of course we've got tons of other footage which didn't fit in with our story but there's many, many more incidents and situations. There is one which I'll tell you which didn't make it into this cut, for example, the girls were surfing like they were all in the water playing and there was a tourist who harassed a girl I mean he physically touched her inappropriately.

And in a typical situation traditionally if such under such things happen we all know of course they happen all over the world, the girl would usually sort of walk away or she'd try to get away and then she would just you know bury herself and then she would just kind of not tell anybody about it this witnessed that tourist was beaten up but a whole group the entire surf club came out the boys and the girls and Aisha took her slippers she took her sandals off her foot and she beat that guy with it.

And we had the footage of it. Then they marched the whole group marched to the police station and they filed a complaint against that tourist and they made the tourist come to the station. We were there we captured some of it, but the point is that we were able to capture such scenes this would never ever have happened with any other group, and it probably never happens you know it'll happen with this group for sure they're not going to take any nonsense from anybody they will not tolerate that and they were talking about it.

Aisha actually said, she said to Elizabeth and said, "Abu," sister, "how is it that my mother or my sister they would never speak out about these things and yet we have decided we're never going to tolerate this and we are able to speak out. Why do you think that happens? Why would they just accept this?" she said, "I will never let any man touch me inappropriately, I mean touch me and be if I don't you know why would I agree to this why would I not say something about it? And why is it that they tolerate this?"

The police harass them that's a whole different story, but these girls came out and said forget it you know, but we'll make sure that this doesn't happen and they found solidarity and community with each other. And this was the only chance that they had to be girls again to be kids to enjoy and have fun. And those were the other moments that we managed to capture, is that that sense of childhood, the sense of camaraderie and as a result of that you know they were there for each other, they understood each other's situations.

It's not that any one of them had a better time than the other. Each one story was a different form of you know just they were going to some real hardship. It's not even I cannot even blame the parents, in many ways, except that dad of course, but the mothers I mean they have to put up with so much. Many of them are single moms, and we documented that two of them are single moms, and the one who in fact lives with her partner he's an abusive partner so their circumstances are really hard and their situation is tough and we've managed to get that.

So, I'll just sum up because my 30 minutes are almost up, by saying I think, the overall, I guess what I'm trying to get at is that this documentary is an observational documentary it covers about three, I would say two and a half to three years in the span of girls lives. Girls who live in poverty. It has, so it can be completely you could take the girls from Bangladesh put them in India.

You can put them in Pakistan you can put them in Sri Lanka in the whole South Asian diaspora probably many countries around the world actually, and it would if you take the economic conditions. It's girls who bear the brunt of it the most because at the end of the day they always consider that the boys, however, they might be in the same hardship or even worse conditions. I'm not saying they have it any better, but they feel that they could be income earners the girls are considered to be a burden and so really the family will use them to get money for as long as they can, and then the idea is to get married.

So, these girls were all when we got them, they were in that cusp they were exactly the stage where the parents were already thinking of getting them married now. Child marriage is not condoned, it's against the law in Bangladesh as in all those countries, but it happens, we all know that it was still happening. So, these girls were rightly so hopefully this this program similar things like this the girls were quite clear because that was another thing that they were talking about themselves saying we are not going to get married till we are you know 18.

After 18 we'll think about it or whatever, that they were very clear that they were going to be the arbiters of their own future. And I think those were some of Aisha's lines. Because to me they're wise beyond their years and I feel like I learned from them so she was like no one's

going to change my future I'm going to write my own future. And I think that that is our takeaway from this film which is, a small intervention as a local program can make a big difference and a documentary like this one which is observational can actually you know, we can actually capture that and we can document the process effectively.

Andrea Paras:

Great, thank you so much Lalita. And you were exactly on time so we now have a chance to open it up to your questions. I did say in the chat because I forgot to mention it earlier that this session has been recorded and the recording will be made available on the CIRCLE website afterwards. If you have any questions, you can hit the reactions button and raise your hand, you can type your question into the chat.

If you'd like to speak your question, unmute yourself and you can turn on your video while you're asking your question. We'd ask you to introduce yourself and just your name and your affiliation, who you are so please questions. Well, I can if nobody's leaping at this opportunity. I have a question which kind of picks up on some of the things that you've mentioned in your comments.

When I watched the film one of the things that I was struck by was the sympathy and compassion in the in the way that you portrayed the parents. Right, it would have been very easy to portray them perhaps in this one-dimensional way like they're just, you know, they're limiting their girl's freedom, they're— the father is abusive, but I felt sympathy for all of the parents, including the father. Right like he's just worried about— I mean he's raging, but out of despair.

He's raging, as well “what is my community going to think of me? My reputation is tattered.” Like he has clearly had a really tough life as well in some ways, and the mothers also have tough lives. And so I wondered what choices you made as you were making the film, in order to capture the complexity of the parents and the relationships with their children in a way that that was so sympathetic, that allowed that compassion to come through even though we also have a problem with the fact that the father is abusive.

Lalita Krishna:

Yeah, no, thank you for that. I'm glad that came across because it was definitely intentional, we witnessed a lot of scenes, especially between Shobe and her mom, some of which didn't make it. But you know they've got this strange relationship, which is probably actually true of most daughters and mothers actually. Where you care deeply for one another, but at the same time because of that you're so concerned about them.

Shobe is deeply concerned that her mother has to work so long, she feels guilt and the burden on this girl because she feels that her father left because of her because of her surfing. The mum clearly tells her he left and the mother made the choice to support her surfing and you know let the father go. And Shobe feels that if she becomes this international champion her

father will somehow come back. I mean for a 13-year-old to have that pressure on her, or that that guilt that she feels.

And then her mother has to work in a tea shop to earn enough money to feed the family. So, we definitely wanted to bring across the fact that their lives are tough, I mean their situation is purely one of an economic situation of poverty. That is if one has to blame anything or you know wants to cast the bad guy here it is poverty.

And we want to be very clear about that. This is not, I mean it was so funny because when I used to tell people this film, they were doing this film called Bangla Surf Girls. CIRCLE, their first question was, "what do they wear? it's a Muslim country."

And I said, "it's a Muslim country has nothing to do with it." Muslim mean there's no nothing it doesn't even play into the story. And it was so easy to get, and that's why I think for me it was so important to show it from the right lens you know. To work with a local filmmaker, so Elizabeth is Bangladeshi, I'm from, I'm South Asian and we made some very conscious choices where we wouldn't stereotype anybody, we wouldn't make comments, we would not come at it with this western lens of "yeah all women are abused, all children are ill-treated, you know parents don't care."

And that's not true, it's and I've seen this consistently everywhere I mean I've done a lot of work especially on children and child labor and hardship, and in many places and I've always seen that the complexity of that situation you cannot just fly in and make an observation and fly out. You have to stay, stick there get the broader picture if you want to do a really good job, or an authentic job, I should say. I mean it just present an authentic portrayal.

Andrea Paras:

Great, thank you! I've received a private question in the chat from somebody who wants to ask the question anonymously. This person writes, there is often a lot of funding for research but not enough funding for projects supporting smaller interventions that support different populations in this intervention that you see here. The person asks, how would you suggest I go about starting a project like this to make a difference? We could also perhaps add the questions, supporting projects like these that make a difference.

Lalita Krishna:

Yeah, that's interesting because I actually wanted to mention that, so thank you for the question. Because it's a segue into something that I... so one of the things I've had to do in my work as a filmmaker is, it's a very tough one actually, and I've been in really difficult to witness different difficult situation is what do I do? What is my role as a filmmaker or as an as a person as an individual?

Even when I'm witnessing some of these situations and hardship. And it's easy to say I'm going to start, you know, I'm going to donate money, or I'm going to do something. And that's something I've had to stay away from. Number one is of course because we we're there to

observe, we're there to document, we're there and that you could take it's a pretty cold and callous point of view and I've questioned that myself, but I find other ways to help.

I also use my film in as much as possible to raise awareness and start something so that's exactly what we've done with Bangla Surf Girls. We've started, we've partnered with a local NGO, a bigger organization which is local it's called JAAGO Foundation, and they have agreed to be the local NGO, the conduit for funds to flow to these girls directly. So, in other words we've set up, it's a trust fund that we will be setting up and it's so money that's anything that we raise through awareness.

And we kind of promote it whenever we show the film and we say, "you can go directly you can go to our website and the link is all there it's called JAAGO Foundation or the JAAGO Foundation website." The JAAGO Foundation is actually set up in North America. In the U.S. and in U.K. they've got their charitable number etcetera so people want to donate and get a tax receipt they can, and we're raising money and we have a goal of twenty thousand dollars. So that could be a trust fund if we're able to do that.

Then we can ensure that the girls will be supported for the you know on the interest on that will pay to support these girls for the rest of their right now what we've been able to do is for two of the girls such as Shobe and Aisha we've already started that so we are able to support them monthly. And I'm really really happy to report that both of them are actually starting out thinking they're both of them are training they they're they've become trainers and continuing their surfing and they're also teaching rollerblading to young girls they're huge mentors and they're such big role models.

But also, we are providing the monthly support so that they don't have to work or you know go into something worse so that's that we're very very happy so our film has already made a tangible difference to their lives we just want to make sure that we have we are able to continue that for a wider audience. But to answer your question that there is in terms of projects so we are hoping that this would lead this at least this particular situation will lead to a more permanent establishment of maybe a girl's club so that it can just be for girls and surfing and it doesn't have to be surfing it's just one of the ways in which girls can break away from that cycle.

Andreas Paras:

Great, thank you Lalita and I think I've found the correct link and posted it in the chat to JAAGO if anybody's interested in taking a look. Any other questions in the chat? I see a hand from Leah. You can go ahead and turn your video on Leah and admit yourself, and please introduce yourself, your affiliation.

Leah Smith:

Yeah for sure, so my name is Leah. I'm a third-year student at uOttawa, so I'm not with Guelph, but one of my professors actually shared this information with me. I've been studying

documentaries through some qualitative research methods classes, so it's really great to hear your story.

One of the big ones that we've kind of addressed is an issue with documentaries or difficulty is being ethical and making sure when you're telling really sensitive stories that your kind of encompassing everyone's sides and being sensitive, knowing what to show what not to show. I'm just wondering how you make those sorts of distinctions of what's necessary for the story versus what's important to keep private to keep everybody safe.

Lalita Krishna:

In fact, interesting, in fact that that's actually very relevant to our other film "Untying the Knot" which is about women sharing their stories of domestic abuse. Two of them were...one of them was within living in that relationship, at the time that she told us the story, and currently continues to do so; and the other one had left a relationship but the partner she was speaking about happened to be, still happens to be a pretty big name in that society.

So, we were very conscious about keeping them safe. I mean that when you when you mentioned about keeping them safe that is something that's constantly in our minds. We constantly check with them before we screen and everything else, so but they can't they have, so first of all I mean I think we always get the consent of our subjects, but that's not enough.

I mean I've been in this business long enough, and I do a lot by the way, on media analysis and I do a lot of work around this and I'm constantly grappling with my own issues, and which evolves as well, so I'm not saying I'm perfect but definitely I'm one of the more conscientious filmmakers I would say. Because I do it deliberately and I do it with intention.

So, first of all, in terms of the film itself, for us to make a film which is accessible to public and is seen we have to make... the story does come first. It's very, very important for us to make sure that the narrative those are the choices we make when at the editing table. Having said that the question that Andrea asked about the families, I mean we were conscious that we had to balance the, bring enough narrative and make sure that the families are given equal weightage.

It was easy for us, really, really easy for us. I mean we have so much footage of the clubhouse Rashed and the kids, just interaction. We could have just ignored the families completely, that could have been a whole different film. Just about the surf club, these girls come here every day and then they do this, but that was not our intention.

Our intention was to show where they come from. Show them as rounded characters: the good and the bad. And they are bratty kids I mean it's not like they were always you know perfect. Of course not, they had their own, we had our own challenges with them, and they had challenges with each other which also we showed to a certain extent. So, I mean these are very conscious choices and especially I think people are becoming conscious in terms of who's telling the story now, who's behind the lens, who is filming. These are all very important.

We found, I'll tell you something we noticed when Elizabeth was filming because she had the camera herself, it was easy for her and the style as you can see is her chatting with the girls they talk to her and then that's the whole style of this observational Doc, she's navigating all these situations. But when we were at the competition you know that the competition that they had, there were a lot of media and other cameras there as well.

And we saw these girls transform they had been trained to deal with media. So, they would turn on their media face, and they would give these pat answers, and they would do this surfing sign, and they would they would be the kids who have to say they say thank you to so, and so thank you to so and so, do this, do this, do this, they had to do that.

They were constantly doing that to us until I said "can you please stop that." I mean I'm not, I went there a few times and I just said stop doing that. Talk to us like when you when we're sitting at lunch and you're throwing things at each other. We want, we want to continue that relationship so it takes a little while.

So, I think what we do is we believe that investment of time is the only way you can get that authentic story and the characters. That's something that we completely committed to do. That we will commit that time, we will spend that time to make sure that we get it. You cannot do it in a news story. It's just not possible, you can get a quick sound bite, but if that's what you want that's fine, but you're not able to do it.

I have made films where I've had a limited amount of time. Where I've done exactly what I said before which is, I go in, and I know what the beginning middle end it's happening it's an event or it's something that's going to happen and I've spent that amount of time over there and I've come back and then we've been able to edit and make the film. But that, it's not a similar it's not an immersive observational dock like this is. So, it's a different style.

Andrea Paras:

Great. Thank you for the question, Leah. Any other questions in the chat? Yes, Ataharul Chowdhury, you can unmute yourself and turn on your video if you wish.

Ataharul Chowdhury:

Morning, this is a really interesting talk and you're actually documented something which, I'm originally from Bangladesh, so what you are really talking I could resonate with lived experience. My question is about, this kind of documentary definitely is needed for social change and inclusive development, but sometimes there is a danger, you can also come up with conflicts within the community.

I don't know whether you faced some kind of conflict like, intra household or societal conflict. Because of your initiative you might not, but I don't know what, I mean from my experience as I have seen, I did some videography especially with farmers, participatory video with farmers that I saw from my experience.

So, my question is there, whether you have observed some kind of conflicts, and do you agree that there is a possibility for, if you did not observe in your case, that possibility of societal conflicts, and how it can be managed, in case of your experience.

Lalita Krishna:

That's a, that's a really, really great question because I have to say I have experienced that. In fact, always, it's I don't think there's a single project that I've done where there's not been an issue of even, if it's not a conflict there's always an issue of some parties or somebody who's involved is against the project for whatever reason.

I think there is also a deep suspicion of media in general, for good reason. We don't believe, we don't trust the media. We believe that whatever we say is going to be twisted and changed and modified. And I have to say that that was definitely an issue here as well in terms of the families... didn't initially, it took a lot to gain their trust.

I think Elizabeth actually went and she stayed the night in one of their communities. Stayed with within Suma's home overnight to tell them, look I'm one of you. She ate with them, she never ever refused to eat with them. So, she immersed herself to prove that she is one of them, to the point where even you saw Aisha's dad saying come, you're welcome, not the club don't come. You could come because you've formed this relationship with my daughters.

So, I think again it goes back to that, but I'm not saying that it can be done every time. What I've done in the past is when I've for my own films, when I've had to deal with this is, I try to meet all the parties. And I really try to explain to people what the process of our filmmaking is, and why it's beneficial to them. I think people don't understand that, because I tell them that if you don't tell your story, if you don't talk to us, if you don't participate, we might end up doing it anyway and you will be out of it.

So, here's your chance, you either participate and be part of it, or you will be left out because we're going to do our story anyway. And sometimes that helps but if there is a real conflict and sense of that's what you're filming then it's a whole, I guess you've got to figure out whether you want what the parties to participate or not, and whether you can tell your story with only one side of it.

So, in this case our biggest challenge was the society, and the families. Then I think, Rashed really helped ease the way to that. And then it was all Elizabeth, because it was her, her personality, her determination, and her commitment. I mean she, she did so much. And don't forget she's a woman so she was a role model too for these girls.

So, they absolutely took to her, and I think that paved the way because her parents genuinely saw that she's sincere and she believes in them. So again, it's a question of time, and investment and it's not, it's not always possible to do that, and sometimes it's really tough because we just don't have the time.

Also, I mean, I have to say, when I went there of course I was viewed as this foreigner, but and that might happen with you as well because you're coming from Canada, you know to the society. So therefore, again it's question of immersing and spending the time so that they know, and they forget, because it's after that when you develop those deep bonds and relationship, people forget that you're actually an outsider. I hope that answers the question.

Ataharul Chowdhury:

Yeah, the interesting thought, I can imagine how it takes a lot of time and effort to make this kind of documentary. In my case actually I entered to the community as a Bangladeshi. But still I saw when I ran a participatory video with a group, two groups of farmers, and I had to work for one year, for my research.

And I, so there is an expectation from the community, and that goes beyond the film or research that you know feel obligation to support that community, whether it's conflict, whether it's resource sharing, or further support. Especially those people who work with you like your client, in that case the girls that work with you in your film, right. So that's just a thought too. Thank you for interesting work. That's great.

Andrea Paras:

Thank you Ataharul Chowdhury. I see a question from Mashreka.

Tahsina Akhter:

Oh yeah, I'm sorry this is my daughter's account, this is Tahsina Akhter. I'm very sorry because I'm, I have joined from mobile device and my mobile device is my daughter's, and my daughter's name and that's why it is. I'm a PhD student Memorial University in anthropology.

Thank you very much for your presentation and that is the film, I'm also from Bangladesh. That's why I'm interested to know what made you interested to do some sort of this sort of thing, I mean this documentary on the surf girls in Cox's Bazar that is one of the tourist spots in our country. What made you interested to go over there and do the work? Thank you.

Andrea Paras:

I think we're going to combine this question from a question that appears in the chat, just for purposes of time, so that you can tackle both of them at the same time. In addition, Elisa writes in the chat, you mentioned that it was important that Elizabeth the filmmaker was local and that you're from the region.

And Elisa wonders how this experience was similar or different for you, as compared to when you've filmed worked on films in other parts of the world. Does your role or approach change depending on your degree of personal connection to a place, in the population? So, if you could tackle both of those questions.

Lalita Krishna:

Right so perhaps I should mention to Tahsina that my... I did mention in the beginning how I got interested in this film it was through another film that I was making in Bangladesh, and I met Elizabeth. That's how and she pitched the story to me. But in terms of my role, that again I hate saying that's a really good question but these are good questions. But it's the— it does change.

It does offer a different perspective, and it's not, it's not an incorrect perspective but it's a different perspective. So, I think when I used to travel to different countries in in Africa and make the films, I think almost all were had a Canadian connection. So, they were about Canadians doing something there, and it was something local that we captured, or did. So, there was that element there which I was able to bring.

I think there is also the fact that I was raised in India and I've grown up in that society, so it gives me a lens, and a different perspective that I am able to relate to. A lot of cultures that I'm able to connect with and get deep at so I- I do find that I'm always looking for something deeper and stronger because I know there is a story behind the story. But, having said that, I would, I have been doing a lot of analysis myself in terms of my own work and I think moving forward I have come to that conclusion.

I don't think, I don't think if I had decided, I am a director as well, if I had decided to make Bangla surf girls myself, and say I'm going to devote all my time and immerse myself into that, it wouldn't have worked, it couldn't have worked. It had to be someone like Elizabeth, who connected with them at a different level. She's extremely talented, she is local as in living in Bangladesh. It's not something I could have done after having lived in North America for so long.

To transport myself to do to understand and relate to the girls the way she did. I think the, it, our relationship also worked so well because she was constantly relating things to me. I was able to connect, and it was a shortcut because I understood what she was saying and I was able to give her tips and tricks on how to deal with certain situations using my experience and my knowledge in general.

So that's how it works, so, but moving forward, if I were to have to work in another country another culture, I would again seek someone local. That's a personal choice that I've made since having seen how this works.

Andrea Paras:

Great thank you Lalita! I think that this is probably a perfect place to bring this to an end, given that we must end at noon. So, I really want to thank you for spending this time with us today and for sharing your experiences and insights about this film. If people have not seen the film, and would like to see the film how can they see it Lalita?

Lalita Krishna:

Well they can get in touch with us, I mean I'm sorry but that link will have to expire and it won't be available if you haven't seen it yet. So do get in touch with me you'll have all the knowledge you can go to banglasurfgirls.com or insyncmedia.ca and you'll be able to you, I mean actually everything that I've said there's a lot of information there, but I'd love to stay in touch and if anybody has any questions please do drop me a line.

Andrea Paras:

Okay thank you so much. Thanks everybody for attending, before we leave, I'd like to draw your attention to our next event that will be hosted by CIRCLE. This is a webinar titled "the principles and practices of critical community engaged scholarship" with Professor Mavis Morton, who's in our Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

That will be taking place on November 17th. If you wish to get on CIRCLE's email list please go to the CIRCLE website [canadaindiaresearch.ca] which I listed up a little bit higher in the chat and you can sign up to get on the listserv, where you'll get information about all of the upcoming events.

So, thank you to everyone. Thank you to Lalita and I wish you all a wonderful afternoon.

[End of Transcript]