

## INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA MILLER



Barbara Miller @ Jason Ashwood / Mons Veneris Films GmbH

**DIRECTOR OF “#FEMALE PLEASURE”,  
A DOCUMENTARY SUPPORTED  
BY EURIMAGES**

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**BY SARAH HURTES**

### HOW DID YOU GET INTO FILM-MAKING?

I grew up near Zurich and received a degree in law. It was only afterwards that I realised it was not the right fit for me. I think justice is one of the most important issues to tackle but, with law, I felt that it was often more about money than equity. As I had also studied film, I felt this was the more suitable pathway for me to fight for justice.

### WHAT LED YOU TO WANT TO MAKE “#FEMALE PLEASURE”?

With my previous documentary “Forbidden Voices” I was travelling all over the world while working for a human’s rights organisation as a filmmaker. Seeing as how women are often not free to speak for fear of discrimination, I wanted to know how women relate to their sexuality. There was a case in India five years ago where a young woman was gang raped, after which she was left to die on the streets. India was for me this country of spirituality that I loved. I was shocked by this incident. At the time I had not really looked into

the situation of women in India and other countries , concerning their intimate relationships and their sexuality. So, I decided to explore further where female discrimination comes from and what forms exist in the 21st century. This was the initial idea of making this film.

### RELIGION SEEMS TO BE ONE OF THE MAIN CULPRITS PORTRAYED IN THE FILM. WAS THIS PLANNED OR DID IT EMERGE IN THE PROCESS OF FILMING?

The initial idea was to have women from different cultures and perhaps from different religions. Then, as I worked on the film, it became clear that it was important to take the role of religion seriously. As I was doing my research, I read several holy books clearly demonising female bodies, portraying women as sinners because of their sexuality. In other words, women’s bodies are what brought sin into our world. We see this with Eve, but it is also in other religions. Religion for thousands of years was what told us right from wrong before we had modern juridical systems. It therefore became crucial to look at the religious roots of views

on the female body. It is not about being anti-religion, but rather looking at religion as a system or as an institution which can be used or misused to portray and suppress women all over the world.



Barbara Miller, Rokudensahiko, Leyla Hussein, Vithika Yadav, Doris Wagner © X Verleih AG

### IS THAT HOW YOU CHOSE THE FIVE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS?

At the beginning it was a big challenge for me to find a way to describe the various forms of discrimination women faced with regard to their sexuality. This is why I ended up choosing women from the five major world religions: Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. I tried to find strong, courageous women who knew about the risks involved in being featured on screen. Within many societies, if you dare to speak up about the situation of women, and in particular female sexuality, you are risking your life. Leyla Hussein needs constant police protection – she lives at a safe-guarded address after having been attacked numerous times. As for Deborah Feldman, her parents and former friends hope that she will commit suicide. I looked for women who had already spoken in public because that means they knew what they were involving themselves in. As a director it is not possible to carry this responsibility alone.

### I DID WONDER ABOUT THE POTENTIAL BACKLASH AND VIOLENCE SOME OF THESE WOMEN MIGHT FACE FROM BEING EXPOSED IN A DOCUMENTARY FILM.

In one way, going public is always a form of protection because the more you are exposed, the more people know about you and the less they can make you easily disappear. This is not to say there are no risks. This is why it was important that these women had already

started their journey being out in the public eye. Just some weeks ago when Leyla went back to Kenya, she was attacked on the streets. We all know about this risk, and we try to do the best we can to protect and help them.

### WHAT WAS IT LIKE WORKING WITH THESE FIVE PROTAGONISTS?

It was fantastic. With each of these five women, we met and immediately knew we wanted to work together. This was very special. For instance, I went to Japan for the first time while filming, and when I met Megumi Igarashi, even with a translator we talked for hours. This is also what happened when these women met each other for the first time at the Locarno Film Festival for the film premiere. It wasn't just on screen; they were in solidarity with each other and talked the whole night.

### YOU SEEM TO HAVE SHOT IN MANY DIFFERENT LOCATIONS – FROM JAPAN TO GERMANY AND THE US – HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT THAT?

It was not at all easy because what I tried to achieve was to place my protagonists at the centre, and so I had to cope with their schedules. I think it is important to enter into their lives and to document the important events that they plan. It was mad sometimes to go from Japan to India and back to America. The other possibility would have been for me to make a movie about my journey moving between these protagonists, but for me it was important that their stories and their views and their voices were at the forefront, not mine.



"#Female Pleasure" Leyla Hussein - © X Verleih AG

### SOMETHING THAT STRUCK ME FROM THE FILM WAS THE COLOUR PALATE, WHICH WAS EXTREMELY VIBRANT AND UPLIFTING RATHER THAN DARK.

Yes, it was extremely important for me to show not



just the violence each woman faced, but their way of fighting back. They remain and see themselves as powerful agents of change, no matter the horrors that happened to them. Leyla calls herself a survivor and an activist. One time someone asked in a Q&A, “What can we do for the victims?” And each woman responded that they do not want to be seen as victims. It was beautiful to see their strength and positive energy. I tried my best to translate this way of seeing the world and coping with really difficult issues in the film.



“#Female Pleasure” - Rokudensahiko © X Verleih AG

### WAS THERE EVER ANYONE TRYING TO STOP YOU FROM MAKING “#FEMALE PLEASURE”?

Absolutely. In the beginning, when I started seeking money for the production, it was extremely difficult because people would say: “Women, religion, and sexuality – forget it! These are topics you shouldn’t do in a movie and certainly not all together in one film.” But once I had done the research and produced an almost 150-page file really going into the story, it was beautiful to see the support we received. This included from Eurimages and the European Parliament, which was wonderful and gave us a lot of strength.

### AFTER FINDING FUNDS FOR THE FILM WAS IT A SMOOTH PROCESS TO MAKE?

There were some difficulties, for instance in India with a Hindu fundamentalist group. With Vithika Yadav I recall there was a situation where these believers were surrounding us and at one point we had to leave because they might have started beating us. Or when Deborah and I first drove through the orthodox community in Williamsburg, they threw things at our car and it would have been impossible to get out of the car. Sometimes it was quite difficult but, in a way, it always depends on how you cope with these situations. We had our eyes open. I tried to prepare and be sensitive to the environment. When we were on

the streets in the Williamsburg community, I just went with a camera woman and no one else because some weeks before there had been a TV station with a big team whose camera had been smashed. When I went to the most orthodox community in Israel, I tried to portray myself as decent and not provocative. With every situation you have a choice to make.

### IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME TO ONE MOMENT WHEN FILMING THAT REALLY TOUCHED YOU, WHICH ONE WOULD IT BE?

The moment when we were in Kenya when the members of the organisation “The Girl Generation” gathered for the first time there. The organisation fights against female genital mutilation (FGM). We showed them video clips shot in London where Leyla is demonstrating to young Somali boys what it really means to undergo FGM, using a plasticine model. It was the very first time in my life that I cried during shooting. In this room, there were women who were cut and had never talked about it. There were also young men and young women who had people in their families who had undergone FGM and survived and are suffering from it. I think we were all crying, realising what it really means for a girl to be mutilated and for a woman to live her whole life with it. The way Leyla is doing it, with the plasticine, is totally abstract. But when you watch it, the experience is utterly real. It was touching to see the reaction of these boys who thought it was important to have their future wives remain virgins and mutilated, and then they realise what this really means. No one had ever taken the time and had the openness and courage to explain to them what it really means. Talking about female sexuality is still such a taboo.



“#Female Pleasure” - Vithika Yadav © X Verleih AG

**IN THE FILM, YOU TALK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF MALE ENGAGEMENT. DO YOU THINK THIS FILM WILL SPEAK TO MEN AND NOT ONLY WOMEN?**

I really hope so. During filming it was interesting to see that there are a lot of men joining this fight, for instance in Kenya with anti-FGM groups, or in India with the movement Love Matters. There are men supporting their wives or supporting the cause of women. For me, this was also an important message in the film: men and women have to change mindsets together. It is also much better for men when women have control over their bodies, when they can decide about their sexuality and dare to say what they want and what they need. Men who have seen the film have also felt empowered and encouraged to help women, to understand women and to fight for their cause. It is important that men like Barack Obama or Justin Trudeau say, "Yes, I'm a feminist". Men and women are equal and we can enjoy sexuality together and be respectful.



"#Female Pleasure" - Doris Wagner © X Verleih AG

**YOU HAVE SCREENED THE FILM AT VARIOUS FESTIVALS. WHAT HAS BEEN THE REACTION?**

We showed it in Locarno and Leipzig and will soon at the International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam (IDFA). We also showed it at a smaller film festival in Switzerland and the reaction has been absolutely overwhelming. At the World Premiere in Locarno, we were very nervous, but we had a 10-minute standing ovation! For me the standing ovation was for these women and for their strength. It was amazing to see the public showing them their respect and love. We got the Critics' Week Award from Locarno and, just the other day, Leipzig awarded us a special prize which doesn't exist but was created by the interreligious jury specifically because they wanted to reward this film.

**YOUR LAST FILM WAS ALSO ABOUT PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES AROUND FEMALE BLOGGERS. THIS FILM FOCUSES ON FEMALE SEXUALITY. DO YOU WANT TO CONTINUE EXPLORING THIS THEME OR DO YOU WANT TO TAKE A BREAK?**

With "Forbidden Voices", I didn't start with the idea to feature women at centre stage. I wanted to look at courageous bloggers and then I realised that blogging, at this time, was a revolution for women in societies like China and Iran who didn't get to say much in public. I think my next topic will be male sexuality, because there is so much fear and so much pressure for men and that needs to be explored. We have to talk about male sexuality too if we want to make sexuality for the whole world better. I am thinking also of confronting mainstream pornography and questioning what it means today to be a man. Men don't really talk about their own sexuality, problems, fears, insecurities. We have to go deeper into this. This will also help women's emancipation and pleasure.