

Projecting Empowerment: Camera Politics in and beyond Twentieth-Century South Asia

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the ongoing mobilization of the camera as a tool for empowerment in the Global South by revisiting the controversy around *Born into Brothels* (2004) and its American director's efforts to teach photography to the children of sex workers in Kolkata. The aesthetic production being demanded and, just as importantly, side-lined by the award-winning film was thrown into relief by the counter-production *We are Foot Soldiers* (2011), whose irreverent and sceptical energy remains instructive.

Keywords: photography, technology, gender, development, power, participation

"Empowering women one camera at a time." I was in the midst of a PhD on amateur and domestic photography in South Asia when this sentence threw me off course. I had been tracing how the camera had made its way into a range of households, or rather, came to be wielded by unexpected hands in unlikely settings since its arrival in the 1850s, and had settled on three women in particular.¹ I had interviewed their relatives and assembled an archive of photographs, letters, articles, and memories that spilled across different family homes, albums, magazines, institutions, and the internet. My research was guided by Ariella Azoulay's work, notably her monographs *The Civil*

¹ My PhD initially centered on Haleema Hashim (1928-2017), a Kutchi Memon woman living in the port city of Cochin, who had commandeered an Agfa Isolette III gifted to her husband by a wealthy relative. I also focused on the Bengali Hindu twin sisters Debalina Mazumder (1919-2012) and Manobina Roy (1919-2001), who went from experimenting with an Agfa Brownie under the tutelage of their father in the provincial town of Ramnagar to partaking in transregional amateur photography clubs that extended into present-day Afghanistan. They also came to publish their street photography from London, Moscow and Paris in the illustrated press. For discussions of their work and legacies, see Mallika Leuzinger, 2017. "The Intimate Contract of Photography: Haleema Hashim's Practice and its Afterlives." *Object*, 19, 29-54, and Mallika Leuzinger, 2020. "Seeing Double: The Photographic Lives of Debalina Majumdar and Manobina Roy," *PIX- Personal Paradigms Issue*, 86-93.

Contract of Photography (2008), and *Civil Imagination* (2012), in which she argues that photography is a political relationality. Those who in the usual terms of citizenship are marginalized or excluded have equal claims on a photograph's meaning or life, and must be recognized in "the practices of both picture taking and the public use and display of photographs" (2008, 20).



Figure 1: Self-portrait taken by Hashim Usman and Haleema Hashim, c.1995.
Photograph courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.



Figure 2 (left): Page from an early album made by Manobina Roy and Debalina Mazumder, ca. 1935 now with Mazumder's daughter Kamalini Mazumder in Kolkata. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.

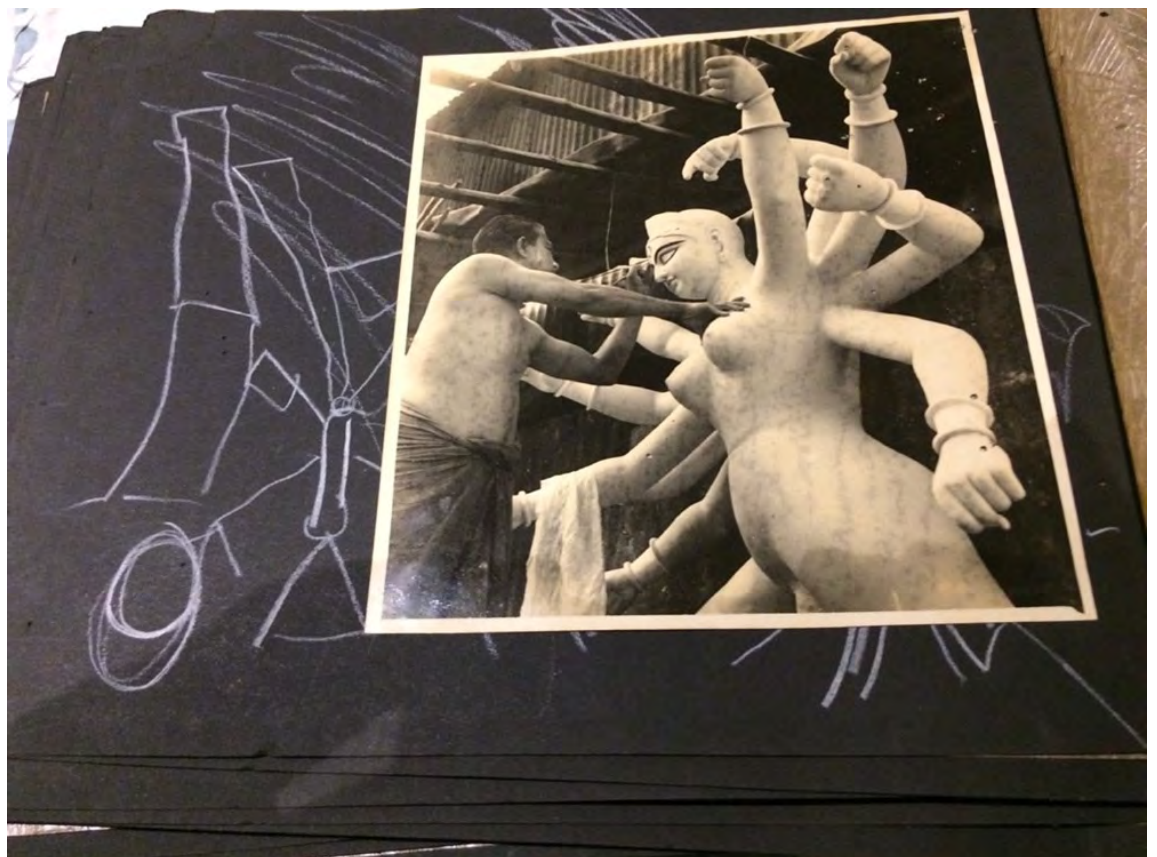


Figure 3 (right): Page from a later album made by Debalina Mazumder in the 1960s and now with her daughter Kamalini Mazumder in Kolkata. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.



Figure 4: A copy of Manobina Roy's article entitled "A Sunday Afternoon in Hyde Park" for the March 1960 edition of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, now with her son Joy Roy in Mumbai. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.



Figure 5: Haleema Hashim's archive as assembled by her great-grandson Nihaal Faizal in Cochin. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.

Azoulay has sought to maintain her conceptualization of photography as “a useful fiction” (Lewis and Parry 2021), but it was during an international conference on “women in photography” that I encountered it as a manifesto, indeed, as a developmental agenda. Specifically, I was introduced to Lensational, “a social enterprise which aims to empower women in developing countries economically and emotionally through equipping them with digital cameras and photography training.”²

I remember seeing an infographic, in which a flurry of icons, arrows, and text boxes emanating from a single point-and-shoot camera put forth “the Lensational model,” and recall being told that, from its headquarters in London and Hong Kong, Lensational had reached over six hundred women “whose voices are rarely if ever heard, from domestic helpers in Hong Kong to children of sex workers in Pakistan.”³

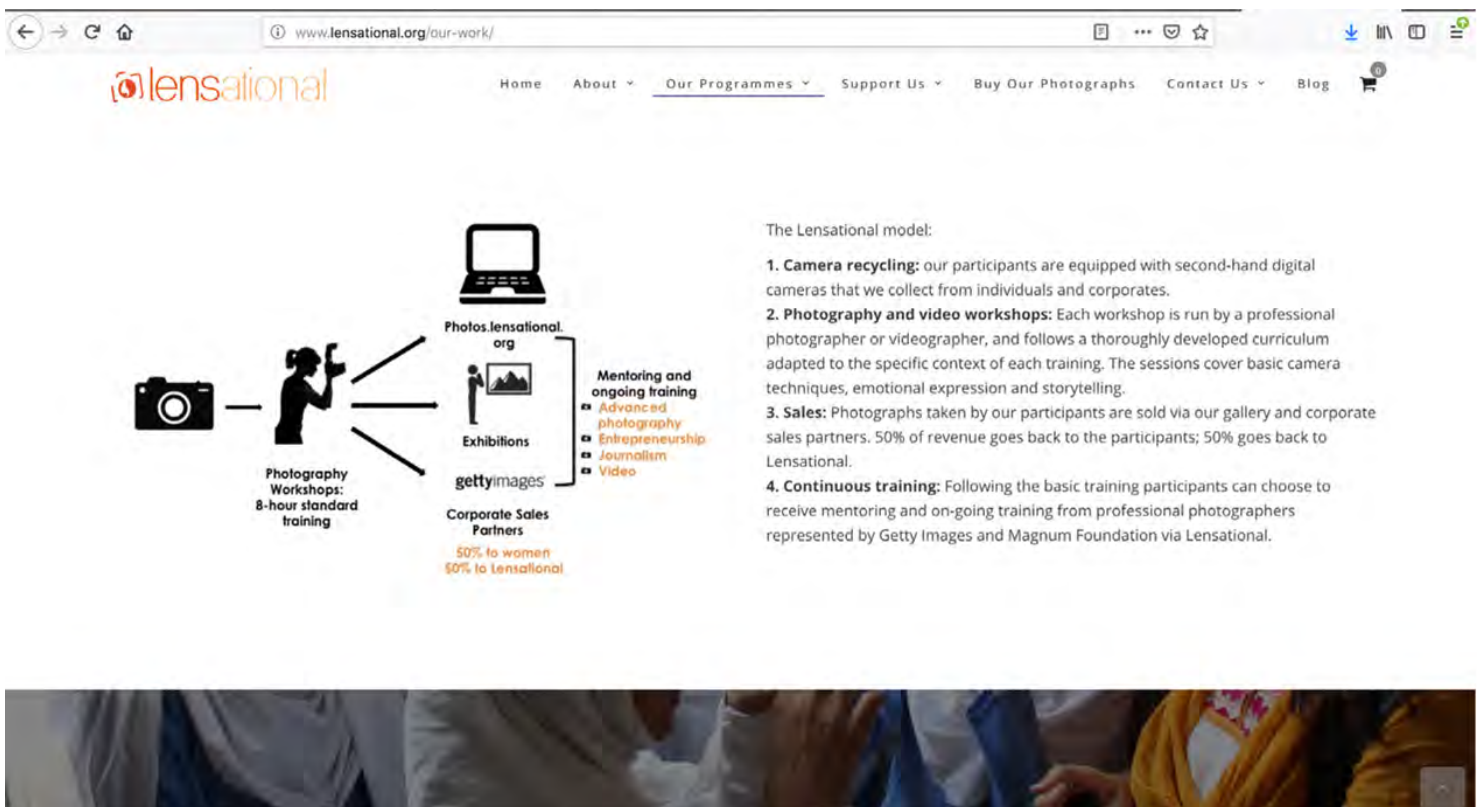


Figure 6: The Lensational model as seen on Lensational website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

² See Lensational. “Home Page.” Accessed 15 November 2017. <http://lensational.org>

³ *ibid.*

These assertions jogged vague memories of an American photographer who had ventured into the red-light district of Calcutta and purported to save the children of sex workers by teaching them photography, a venture which she filmed. Given the furore that had surrounded her film, I was struck by the enthusiastic tone of the presentation and the approval that it elicited from the audience. My own presentation was commended for proving that the camera had been “a tool of empowerment” even in earlier times, and for foregrounding “women photographers in parts of the world that are as yet unfamiliar within a US/European photo historical context.”⁴ Suddenly caught between these academic, artistic, corporate and activist visions of photography, I came to pay closer attention to the assumptions and appropriations driving them, and equally, to instances of dissent and moments of mismatch.

Camera projects

After the conference, I began interviewing the founders and facilitators of camera projects and studying the materials they produced. Scrolling through the Lensational website, for instance, involves repeated viewings of an info banner that declares in upbeat blue lettering:

*Our work doesn't end after training. We grow our students' photography portfolio and sell their work on our own stock platform, and through our partner Getty Images. We supply you with the first female-centric collection of images produced in the developing world.*⁵

An action shot of a veiled brown woman rising above a gritty landscape into a gloriously clear sky is also set to recur. Lest her act of kicking back be seen as frivolous, heavy statistics are marshalled, such as the fact that only a miniscule fraction of the suppliers of the stock photo industry, “which is worth \$2.88 billion globally,” live in Asia (6%) and in Australia, Latin America, and Africa combined (1%).⁶ Media reports and press releases are also provided, such as a notification that the toiletries brand Dove has teamed up with Getty Images and a network called Girlgaze, comprised of 200,000 female-identifying and non-binary “creatives” to “take action,” and “drive a more

4 See Echo Gone Wrong. 23 February 2017. “Call for papers. Fast Forward: Women in Photography – Lithuanian Edition.” Accessed 27 April 2022. <https://echogonewrong.com/call-papers-fast-forward-women-photography-lithuanian-edition/>

5 See Lensational. “About.” Accessed 31 January 2019. <http://www.lensational.org/>

6 See Lensational. “Impact Report 2017,” 1-35, 8. Accessed 31 January 2019. http://www.lensational.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Impact-report_FINAL.pdf

diverse and inclusive landscape through media and advertising.” The linked-to page consolidates rather than competes with Lensational’s model, emphasizing the growing appetite for change spelled by the arrival of “the world’s largest stock photo library created by women and non-binary individuals to shatter beauty stereotypes by showing women as they are, not as others believe they should be.”⁷

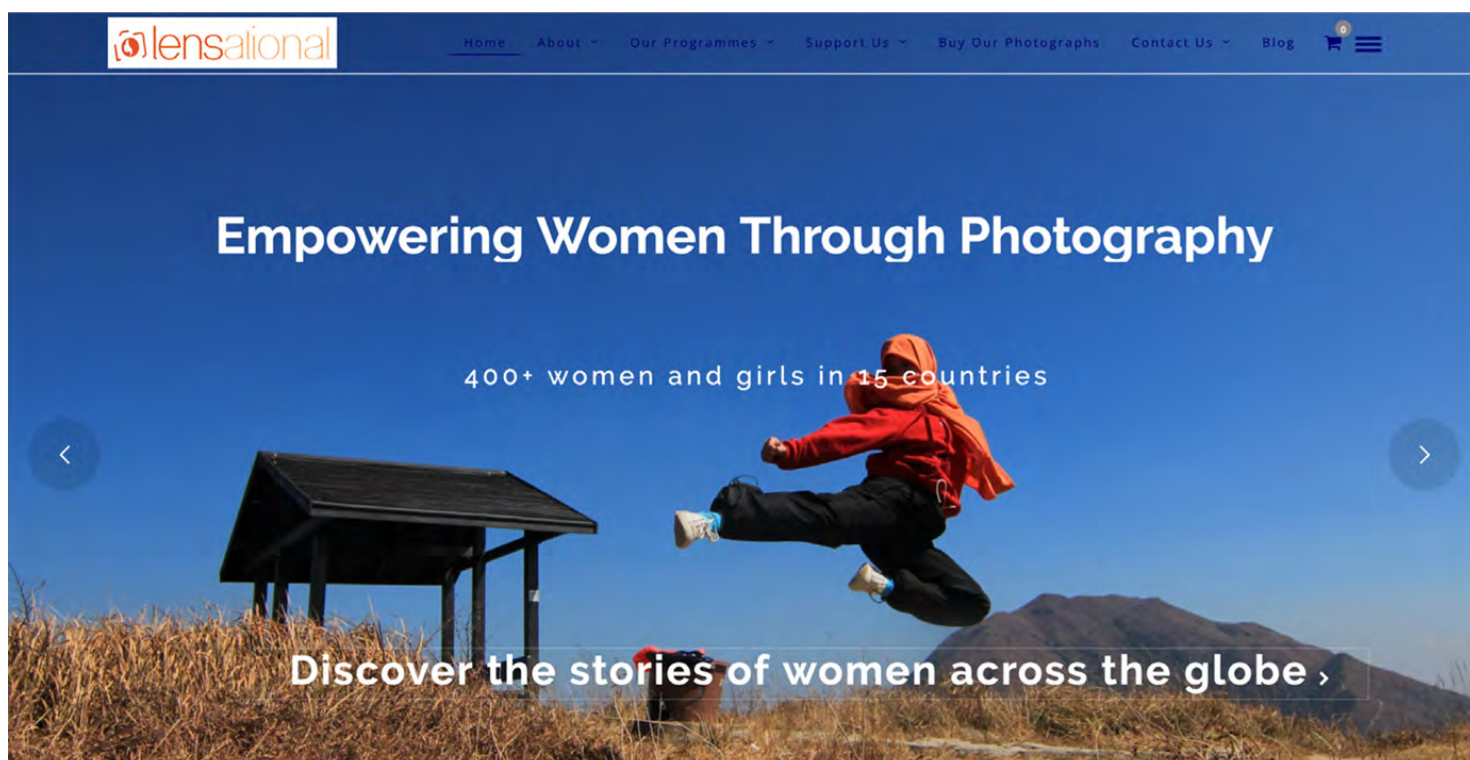


Figure 7: The landing page of the Lensational website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

I soon learned that, although Lensational’s programs are mushrooming in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and India, they are far from the only photography-based initiatives that seek out women in South Asia. There is PhotoVoice, “a UK-based charity that uses ethical photography to promote positive social change;” in 2010, for instance, PhotoVoice conducted the program “Images of Foul Play” with eleven Dalit men and women campaigning to eradicate manual scavenging in the Delhi district of Seemapuri.⁸ There is “Ladies Only – Stories for All,” organized by the indigenous artist Aqui Thami and the British photographer Joanna Wingate, for which five women in the

⁷ See PR Newswire, 27 March 2019. “News from press.gettyimages.com.” Accessed 31 January 2019. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news/press.gettyimages.com>.

⁸ See PhotoVoice. “Images of Foul Play.” Accessed 20 August 2019. <https://photovoice.org/images-of-foul-play/>

Mumbai slum of Dharavi were lent Canon and Nikon point and shoot cameras donated by British tourists from August to October 2013.⁹ Thami promoted the workshop in interviews for the city's leading newspapers, asserting that, "though the five women spoke Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Hindi—their communication was through portrait and street photography. The photographs and the pre-workshop interviews are compiled in a photo-book, the proceeds of which will go to the women." The article invited people to an exhibition at the Art Loft, a venue in the up-scale neighborhood of Bandra.¹⁰ And there is Photographing the Female (PTF), launched by the Danish photographer Sarah Høilund in 2017 and intended to be "a global platform that uses the transformational power of visual storytelling to explore what it means to be female around the world today."¹¹

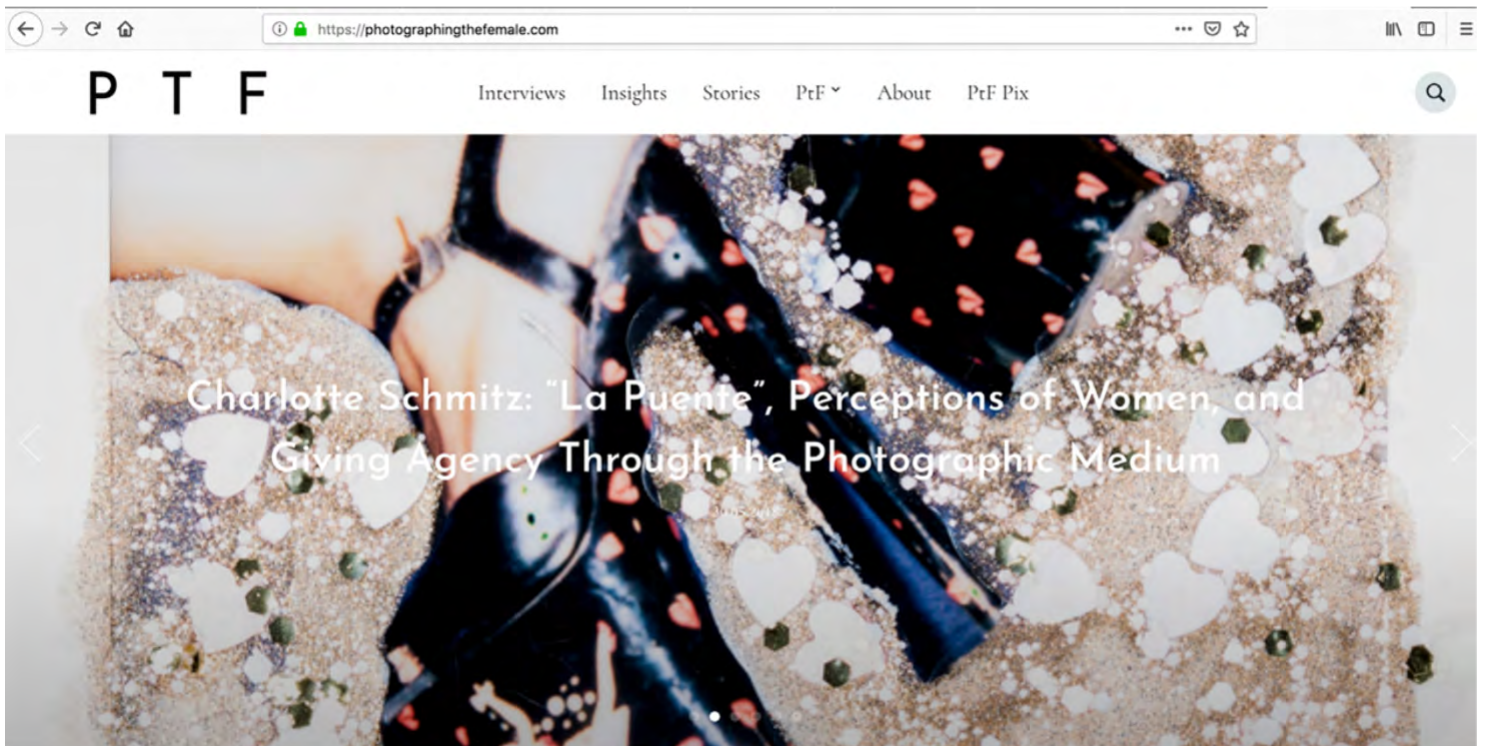


Figure 8: Landing page of Photographing the Female website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

9 For a blog post by one of the donors which cites Joanna Wingate's detailed description of the workshop, see Bombay Jules. 2013. "The Dharavi Cameras – Follow-up News." Accessed 21 March 2019. <http://bombayjules.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-dharavi-cameras-follow-up-news.html>

10 See Kanika Sharma. 2013. "Mum's the word in Dharavi," *mid-day.com*. Accessed 19 January 2019. <https://www.mid-day.com/articles/mum-s-the-word-in-dharavi/237589>

11 See "Photographing The Female." Accessed 21 January 2019. <https://photographingthefemale.com> The website has since ceased to exist but for a discussion of the initiative, and even the Alsisar workshop by Høilund, see Chiara Bardelli Nonino. 2018. "Photographing the Female," *Vogue Italia*. Accessed 14 January 2022. https://www.vogue.it/en/photography/emerging-photographers/2018/06/07/photographing-the-female-by-sarah-hoilund/?refresh_ce=

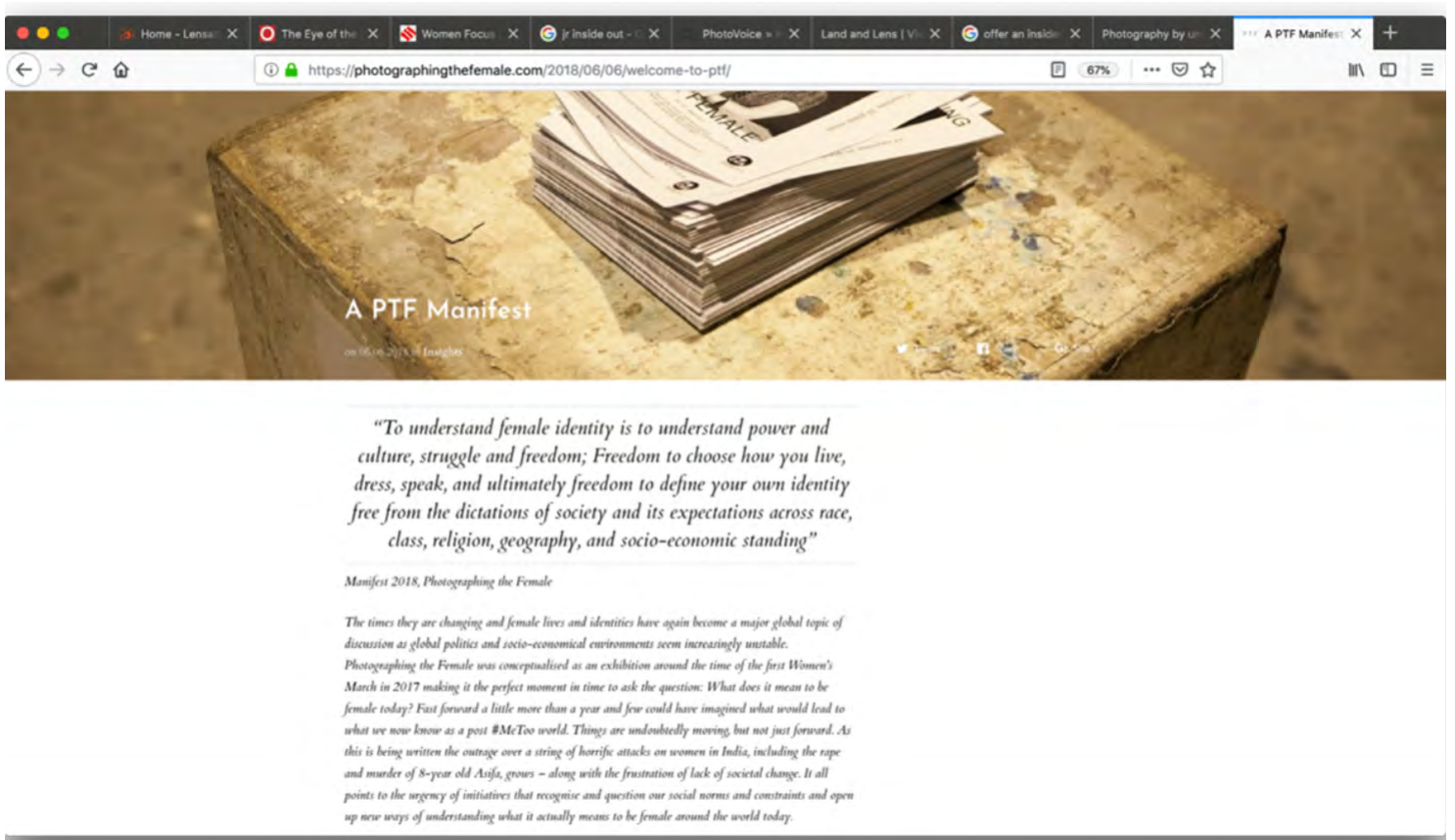


Figure 9: Manifesto page as seen on Photographing the Female website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

PTF ran two workshops: the first was in connection with the arts and music festival Magnetic Fields, held in the former royal palace of Alsisar in northwest India, for which women from the nearby village were given 24 hours to photograph with disposable cameras.¹² The second workshop took the form of a week-long program on the theme of "girlhood" with teenage girls in Dharavi.¹³ There, as Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava observe, "an increasing number of students, researchers, activists, and writers are feeding off Dharavi to produce new concepts, participatory methodologies, and architectural systems" (2015, 64).

Where Echanove and Srivastava's observations stop short of critique, Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari's *Participation – The New Tyranny* is forthright. Written two decades ago on the back of beleaguered development programs and, significantly, conferences, their book outlines:

12 See Magnetic Fields Festival. "Photographing The Female." Accessed 25 August 2019. <http://2017.magneticfields.in/photographing-the-female/>

13 See Photographing The Female. "Workshops." Accessed 18 October 2018. <https://photographingthefemale.com/workshops/>

[t]he naivety of assumptions about the authenticity of motivations and behaviour in participatory processes; how the language of empowerment masks a real concern for managerialist effectiveness; the quasi-religious [and I would add colonial] associations of participatory rhetoric and practice; and how an emphasis on the micro level of intervention can obscure, and indeed sustain, broader macro-level inequalities and injustice (2001, 14).

Born into brothels

It is my contention that Lensational, PTF, and “Ladies Only—Stories for All” revitalize a particular skeleton in the participatory closet. They hearken back to the 2004 project undertaken in Calcutta’s red-light district of Sonagachi by British photographer Zana Briski and American film editor Ross Kauffman, which drew a fierce rebuttal for its adverse treatment of local participants.¹⁴ It piqued the interest of my interlocutors, who said it was “inspiring” and “encouraging;” the Lensational facilitator who was most familiar with the project expressed his sympathy for Briski and impatience with her critics.¹⁵

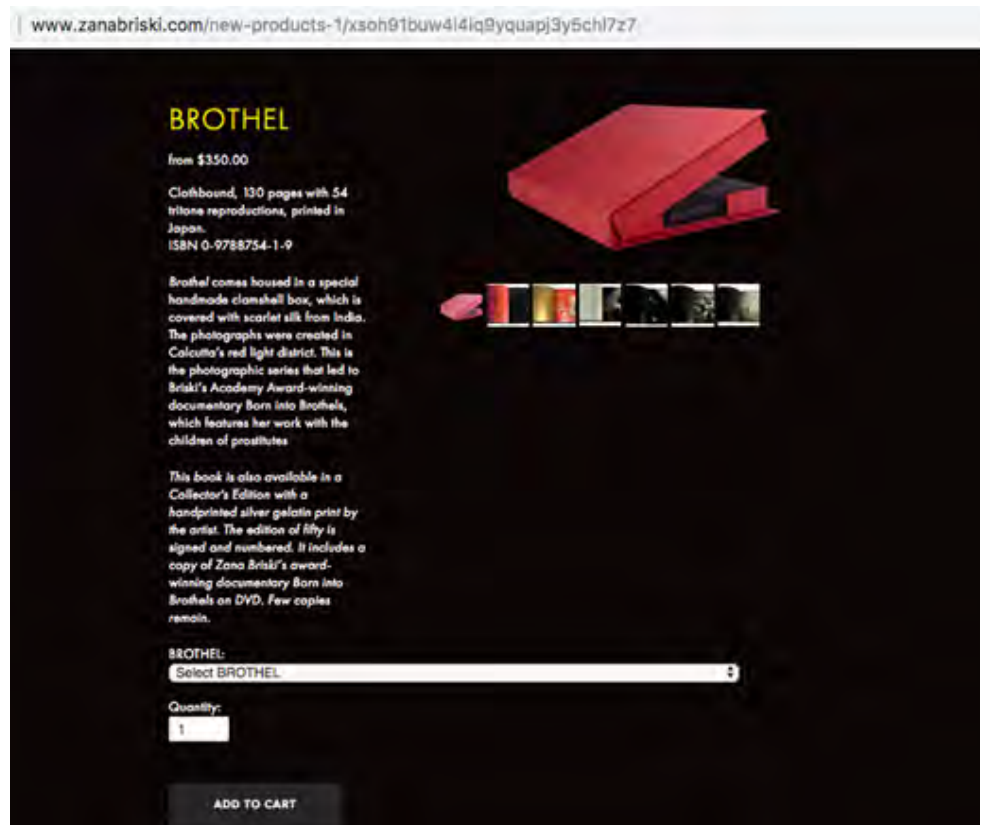
14 These critiques have been compiled with links to sources in 2009. See “Born into Brothels – The Hollywood Scandal.” Accessed 1 March 2019. <http://bornintobrothelslies.blogspot.com/>

That the camera itself is simply one object in this arsenal of (neo)colonial paraphernalia is suggested by projects that deploy this language in relation to other “western” and/or “modern” objects that they “gift” to women, such as sanitary napkins. Thus the fate of *Born into Brothels* is intertwined with the current fanfare around *Period. End of Sentence*, directed by Iranian-American filmmaker Rayka Zehtabchi, which has received the 91st Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. The film focuses on how the introduction of a machine that makes sanitary napkins impacts the lives of a group of women in the northern-Indian rural district of Hapur. See PTI, *The Wire*. 2019. “Period. End of Sentence, a documentary on menstruation in India, wins an Oscar.” Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://thewire.in/film/period-end-of-sentence-documentary-oscar-menstruation>

For the earliest critique against the film-makers and producers’ visions, see Mythispeaks, 2019. “And the Oscar goes to “Period. End of Sentence” – for use of false data, misrepresentation of Indian women and violation of child rights.” Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://mythispeaks.wordpress.com/2019/02/26/and-the-oscar-goes-to-period-end-of-sentence-for-use-of-false-data-misrepresentation-of-indian-women-and-violation-of-child-rights/>

15 I am quoting a Lensational facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in December 2018.

Figure 10: *Born into Brothels* merchandise as seen on Zana Briski's website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.



Born into Brothels chronicles how Briski arrives in Sonagachi, gives film-roll cameras to five girls—Suchitra, Tapasi, Shanti, Puja, and Kochi—and three boys—Gaur, Manik, and Avijit—and founds the charity *Kids with Cameras*.¹⁶ Briski also elaborated on this journey for an article in a medical journal:

As a New York-based photographer, I became interested in the lives of these children in 1998 when I first began photographing prostitutes in Calcutta. Living in the brothels for months at a time, I quickly developed a relationship with many of the kids who, often terrorized and abused, were drawn to the rare human companionship I offered. The children were fascinated by my camera, and I thought it would be great to see the world through their eyes. I had the idea of teaching photography to the children of prostitutes. To do so would involve overcoming nearly insurmountable obstacles: brothel owners, pimps, police, local politicians, and Mafiosi. I held weekly photography workshops from 2000 to 2003. In class, the children learned camera basics, lighting, composition, the development of point-of-view, editing, and

¹⁶ See Head First Development. "Kids with Cameras." Accessed 15 November 2017. <http://headfirstdevelopment.org/kidswithcameras/>

sequencing for narrative. To my delight, equipped with inexpensive point-and-shoot 35-mm cameras, the children produced incredible work that was emotionally direct and unfiltered. Their images are explosions of color: self-portraits, family pictures, street scenes, stunning tableaux of Bengali life. In 2002, I established the non-profit organization Kids with Cameras to empower children through learning the art of photography and to support their well-being and education by sponsoring them in homes and schools outside of Calcutta's dangerous red-light district. Through the sale of their photographs, the children support their own education and their own futures. Using this project as a model, Kids With Cameras will send photographers to teach other marginalized children in communities around the world. (2004, 512)

The construction of Sonagachi as a lurid space of violence and degradation, overrun by a cast of evil characters, and of Briski as a guardian angel uniquely positioned, through her Western perspective and connections, to save innocent children, catapulted *Born into Brothels* into the limelight. It won hundreds of positive reviews and thirty awards, including the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award.¹⁷ A reporter at *The New York Times* was impressed that “Ms. Briski had the simple, improbable and altogether inspired idea of organizing a photography class.” He waxed lyrical about how the children’s photographs provided the film “with some of its most beautiful and revealing images, offering glimpses of life in the crowded, colorful alleyways of the red light district that no outsider could capture.”¹⁸ Such orientaling and exaggerated praise is just as prevalent in Indian newspapers years later. A Kolkata-based journalist declared in 2015 that Briski should be celebrated for her efforts to engage children alternately described as doomed, with their fates having “been sealed at birth, born to be shunned by society at large, with little or no prospects for their future,” and as “a bunch of bright-eyed tweens, frolicking around in the neighborhood lanes, flying kites, pulling each other's legs.”¹⁹

17 See “A slice of Calcutta in Oscar spotlight – *Born into Brothels* wins award, *The Little Terrorist* misses out,” 2005. *The Telegraph Kolkata*. Accessed 3 March 2019. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/a-slice-of-calcutta-in-oscar-spotlight-born-into-brothels-wins-award-the-little-terrorist-misses-out/cid/669912>

18 See A. O. Scott. 2004. “Nurturing the Talents of Children in Calcutta.” *The New York Times*. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/movies/nurturing-the-talents-of-children-in-calcutta.html>

19 See Manimanjari Sengupta. 2015. “These Children Were Born Into Brothels. But They Didn’t Let Prostitution Become Their Destiny,” *ScoopWhoop*. Accessed 3 March 2019. <https://www.scoopwhoop.com/inothernews/born-into-brothels/#.lj7ejr9fg>

Despite this acclaim, and Briski's missionary zeal to expand *Kids with Cameras* to other countries, the organization has disappeared from public view amidst allegations of unethical fundraising and breach of promise. An internet search of the project yields reports of the children receiving little or no money raised in their name.²⁰ Briski has ceased doing charity work, film-making, and even photographing human subjects. Although she was amenable to being interviewed by Tiffany Fairey, the founder of PhotoVoice, in connection with the latter's doctoral research in 2011, and also by a journalist who ran a profile on her as recently as March 2017, Briski's secretary informed me that contact would be impossible given her total immersion in a long-running art project based around photographing insects.²¹

The interventions that forced this retreat began in 2005 with a letter to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences from Partha Banerjee, who undertook post-production translation for *Born into Brothels*.²² He contested the "often-explicit presumption by both the filmmakers and the U.S. media personalities (including the nominators at AMPAS) that the efforts by Ms. Briski and Mr. Kauffman were able to uplift the children from the poverty and destitution they live in." He had visited the children between the end of filming and the release of the film and found that they were living "even a worse life than they were in before Ms. Briski began working with them." Their parents, too, had been misled into believing that by providing the filmmakers "with so much unrestricted access to their secretive lives... and that [,] too, so generously (...[had] their written consent ever [been] requested and received by the filmmakers?) ... their children would also be sharing some of the glories the filmmakers are now shining in." Above all, Banerjee objected to the film's misrepresentation of Sonagachi. The efforts of "hundreds of Calcuttan activists, social workers and medical practitioners" have made Sonagachi a relatively safe haven for sex workers and their children, a place "synonymous with many struggles won by its inhabitants." Citing well-

20 *Kids with Cameras* no longer has a website, its URL redirecting to "Hotels-Rajasthan." Accessed 20 February 2019. <http://www.hotels-rajasthan.com/kids-with-camerasorg/> For a report on the uncertain fate of the children featured in *Born into Brothels*, see Jhimli Pandey Mukherjee and Mandal, Caesar. 2009. "At the Oscars four years ago, now a sex worker," *The Times of India*. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/At-the-Oscars-four-years-ago-now-a-sex-worker/rssarticleshow/4186270.cms>

21 That Briski maintains her missionary stance is evident in her recent statement that photographing insects is "Not so different... from what I did in the brothels – bringing attention to those who are feared, ignored, abused, from their point of view." See Tony Rogers. 2017. "Born into Brothels' Director Zana Briski Returns to her First Love: Photography", *ThoughtCo*. Accessed 21 March 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/born-into-brothels-director-zana-briski-2073806>

22 Banerjee's role as translator foregrounds how language barriers are glossed over in most of the camera projects I have studied. Briski did not speak Hindi, Joanna Wingate of 'Ladies Only' writes, "I conducted the sessions in English and Aqiu, translated the workshop into Hindi for the group. This was the first such experience for me. Our group was a multi-language group! English, Hindi, Marathi and Telegu." See Bombay Jules, "The Dharavi Cameras – Follow-up News."

established “financial institutions, health clinics, sex education schools and blood banks,” Banerjee ridiculed “the conjecture drawn by the makers of *Born into Brothels* that it was only them that were responsible for any humanity and benevolence doled out to these children and their parents.”²³

The most conspicuous erasure is of the sex worker's collective Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), active in Sonagachi since the early 1990s, which facilitated Briski's stay. The DMSC's peer-based approach foregrounds the agency of the sex workers and their collective bargaining power. It is credited with ensuring that the HIV rate amongst sex workers in Sonagachi decreased to 5% and remains lower than in any other red-light district in India. *Born into Brothels* portrayal of “sex workers' odd relationships with their children... where sex workers are depicted as negligent, abusive parents who push their children into criminality and sex work” bulldozed over the DMSC's efforts to produce an image of sex work that deconstructs “the binaries of [an] moral/immoral framework that the traditional discourse is all about;”²⁴ and specifically, “to run not only [a] non-formal education program but varied activities to help build the career of their children.”²⁵

A second letter was thus penned, this time from the DMSC secretary Swapna Gayen to the editor of *The Telegraph*, Kolkata's leading English-language newspaper, following their report of the film's Oscar win. “Being a sex worker and a mother,” Gayen wrote, “I can say that we are more protective as mothers than can be imagined.” She highlighted that the DMSC had asked Briski “many times to share the film with our ethics committee, but she didn't pay any attention.” Gayen also underscored how, “[i]n this age, when it is the norm to respect ethical considerations while making documentaries, the film used hidden cameras to shoot intimate moments in the lives of sex-workers and their work zones.” Gayen feared that “the global recognition of such a film, giving a one-sided view of the lives of sex workers in a third world country, may do a lot of harm to the global movement of sex workers for their rights and dignity,” reversing “hard-won victories for rights, un-stigmatized healthcare and access to resources.”²⁶

23 See Partha Banerjee. 2005. “Documentary ‘Born Into Brothels’ and the Oscars: an insider's point of view.” Accessed 9 January 2019. https://mm-gold.azureedge.net/Articles/partha_ban/born_into_brothels.html

24 See DMSC. “History.” Accessed 20 February 2019. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130903060029/http://durbar.org/html/history.asp>

25 See DMSC. “Equal Participation – Durbar repositions sex workers' children.” Accessed 20 February 2019. <https://durbar.org/html/education.html>

26 See Swapna Gayen. 2005. “Nightmares on celluloid” [Letters to Editor], *The Telegraph Online*. Accessed 2 March 2019. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/letters-to-editor-15-03-2005/cid/1022371>



Figure 11: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 0:34 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

We are Foot Soldiers

There was also a counter-production made by Amra Padatik, a collective of and for the children of sex workers under the aegis of DMSC, and by the filmmakers Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar.²⁷ *We are Foot Soldiers* begins with a lively protest march organized against the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act. Several children are seen carrying placards, chanting slogans, and generally asserting themselves on the streets, such that their political agency takes center stage. Subsequent scenes feature daily life in Sonagachi—tea is poured, Badminton is played, a mother and toddler laugh into the camera, a young boy sticks his tongue out and scampers behind a pillar—and five children in particular: Gobindo, Mithu, Ratan, Chaitali, and Pinky.

27 The filmmakers have reflected on the ethical and methodological issues which they had to navigate. See Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar. 2011. "Beyond Compassion: Children of Sex Workers in Kolkata's Sonagachi," *Childhood*, 18 (3), 333-349 and "Notes on unlearning: Our feminisms, their childhoods." *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?*, edited by Rachel Rosen and Katherine Twamley. London: UCL Press. Although my essay focuses on *We Are Footsoldiers*, the DMSC and the perspectives of the sex workers in Sonagachi were already the subject of the 2002 film *Tales of the Night Fairies*, directed by Shohini Ghosh.



Figure 12: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 4:15 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 13: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 2:41 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.





Figure 14: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 2:50 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 15: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 1:49 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.



The camera pans, for instance, over a series of women's portraits painted on canvas. As Ratan explains, "I've had a knack for painting since childhood. But I've never had the opportunity to gain formal training. If I'd see a picture anywhere, and if it appealed to me, I would paint it." In his opinion, the "neighbourhood is full of artisans. Even little boys can draw beautifully!" although he is keen to point out that his talent amounts to more than just making pretty pictures: "I know commercial art [too]. I can make thermocol models, *pandals*" (2:36). Other shots include Gobindo playing guitar, Mithu speaking about the joy she gets from listening to music with her daughter, and a dance routine being performed in a room full of adults at the edge of their seats, whose clapping and singing along discloses a keen interest and investment in their children's personal development. The voice-overs point out that, in contrast to Briski's focus on the stigma of being involved in sex work, it is the children's respect for their mothers' profession, the incomes it generates, and close familial bonds that have protected them. For Rathan, "my mother and me were like friends, we always shared our feelings with each other openly" (7:22).

In a mere twenty-six minutes, such scenes undermine Briski's authorial voice as well as the narratives now being formulated by camera project facilitators such as Aquí Thami. She told a journalist that prior to her running of the "Ladies Only" workshop in Dharavi,

*these women haven't experienced friendship, in the sense that they never went to school, and even if they did, they dropped out quite early and never made life-long friends. Then they became busy with housework and taking care of their kids. They never went outside of their homes to do something they felt good about.*²⁸

Lensational likewise introduced the two-day workshop it ran for Chennai schoolgirls by emphasizing their social isolation and heralding the need to "reach," "discover," "unveil," and "develop" their lives.²⁹ *We are Foot Soldiers* clarifies the extent to which such an outlook is perceived as claustrophobic, aggressive, and inappropriate by those whom it seeks to harbor.³⁰

28 See Riddhi Shah. 2017. "Dharavi Art Room: a Safe Space for Healing by Art," *The Future of Design*. Accessed 21 March 2019. <https://www.tfod.in/art-design-articles/5582/dharavi-art-room-a-safe-space-for-healing-by-art>

29 See Lensational. "School Girls with Nalandaway Foundation." Accessed 14 January 2022. <https://www.lensational.org/portfolios/india-nalandaway-foundation/>

30 The persistence of this voyeuristic schema is evidenced by an inadvertent disclosure told by the filmmaker of *Period. End of Sentence*: "We were filming people telling us things that they don't want to be talking about, so we were always trying to not be invasive, especially with the camera. And in the edit. For example, we walked into a co-ed classroom, unannounced, in India. The teacher asked the 15-year-old students if anyone could tell her what menstruation was. And there's a shot in the film of a young girl who's called upon, and she stands up completely petrified. In the film, there is about 30 seconds where she literally cannot say a word. In real life we got about three minutes of footage of her where it seemed like she was going

The film also directly confronts the hype around *Born into Brothels*, showing the children watching it for the first time on the Amra Padatik premises, scrunching up their faces and subsequently launching into a series of sharp and nuanced criticisms. Gobindo comments that: “Our lives have become consumable products in the market. That this is a bad and dirty place for children. And that the only way out is to rescue us out of the brothels... This perspective is extremely disrespectful towards our mothers” (12:58). Pinky, too, is under no illusions about the voyeuristic and moralistic gaze they have been subjected to and metaphorically turns the camera back on Briski (13:14):

I didn't like the film at all. It belittles us. A sex worker is shown changing her clothes. Don't mothers change clothes in all houses? Was it right to shoot that? Just because they are sex-workers living in brothels people dare to expose their lives in this way. If I go and secretly shoot their private lives, how will they feel? I heard the film won an Oscar. Given a chance... I would've beaten the Oscar out of the film!

Arguably, *We Are Foot Soldiers* does put *Born into Brothels* in its place. The intellectual clarity and eloquence of its voice-overs, brevity, amateur montages, and graphics scupper Briski's blockbuster aspirations. And where *Born into Brothels* involved much-publicized screenings at cinemas and exclusive fundraising events at five-star hotels and can now only be accessed online upon payment, *We are Foot Soldiers* has always been freely accessible online and has been incorporated into Amra Padatik's own advocacy materials.

to faint. It was so hard to watch and realize that the shame was so painful. In the edit, part of you wants to indulge in the drama of it and continue that shot for as long as you can. And then you realize what it is to be respectful and sensitive and not exploit them.” See Nayantara Roy. 2019. “Period. End of Sentence: Transforming a Taboo into a Cause,” *International Documentary Association*. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.documentary.org/online-feature/period-end-sentence-transforming-taboo-cause>

There is no acknowledgement of how this extreme discomfort was induced by the filmmakers' unannounced presence and insistence on making her talk about her period in front of her classmates, teacher, and a rolling camera. Instead, her sense of shame is taken as a sign of village backwardness. The desire to be ethically considerate also figures here as a self-promotional gesture rather than a sincere effort to consider the girl's welfare.



Figure 16: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 3:36 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 17: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 12:22 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.



Figure 18: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 12:58 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

The construction of “new eyes” and intimate commodities

In academia, a detailed critique of the visual strategies by which *Born into Brothels* purports to see, and present, the red-light district through the eyes of its children was offered by Frann Michel. She identifies how the film’s manipulative patterns of cutting between day and night, sharp and grainy, outdoor and indoor scenes construct the innocence of the children’s vision in contrast to their environment. Michel also notes that “insofar as Briski’s teaching directs the children to understand their photography as art, she coaxes them toward an aesthetic marketable in the Western Art world” (2007, 59) – i.e., toward images that are “emotionally direct and unfiltered” and/or “explosions of color” (Briski 2004, 512).

During “editing sessions” in which the children were asked to examine and discuss the images they had taken as contact prints, Michel flags how Briski does not attempt to teach them about developing or printing, thereby limiting (their understanding of) the process of editing to playing with composition and framing in the act of photographing. “Of course,” Michel observes, “the very idea that composition and framing must be learned belies any notion of an innocent eye that simply records an autonomous vision, and Briski’s vision clearly shapes the choice of images for eventual exhibition” (2007, 59).

For Michel, it is no coincidence that the project’s most publicized images were “accidental” in nature. Suchitra is filmed saying that the subject of her striking portrait “was asking me to take her picture, so I got irritated and took it;” a visceral photograph Manik made of his sister’s hand obstructing the camera lens is attributed to a fight between siblings rather than a collaborative creative experiment. Moreover, in giving the children analog film cameras rather than digital cameras, Michel contends that “Briski forces a lag between the taking and the reading of the image, between the children’s creative and critical acts, and allows her own critical skill to intervene, as a model for theirs” (2007, 59).

This is equally so for PTF workshops whose imagery, I was informed, shared a “focus on the social element, family, kids, friends, dogs, animals. And then a good mix of household, life on the streets and objects and buildings.” The organizer claimed that they had a “beautiful immediacy to them—they were rarely very staged. Much more intuitive, like snap-shots are, which also lent them a sense of intimacy and felt more personal.” While the predominance of this aesthetic also proceeds from an accident (“We were supposed to show them some reference images but, as far as I remember, I forgot to bring the printouts 😊. Instead we just gave them ideas of what could be

interesting things to shoot.”), it is above all the result of participants having recourse only to disposable cameras with 36 color exposures, twenty-four hours and their immediate surroundings.³¹ Moreover, the choice of “disposable” cameras compounds the analogue “lag” that Michel identifies, for it leaves the participants unable to experience the developing and printing process. It also suggests that their voices/visions are not worthy of a greater investment.

PhotoVoice eschews disposable cameras in its projects because of its throwaway associations. Like Lensational, it is convinced of the long-term cost effectiveness and the broader availability of the infrastructures around digital cameras.³² Yet both PhotoVoice and Lensational are answerable to Michel’s critique. In all but the rarest of cases, their digital cameras are point-and-shoot models that companies like Nikon and Canon are donating because they are being phased out in the transition to camera phones and high-end DSLRs. Although favored by facilitators for being inexpensive, durable, and modest, these cameras are assigned to participants only for the duration of the workshop. They cannot be used outside the workshop’s hours and premises because, in the eyes of the organizers, allowing participants to “take them home” means they will “likely be lost” or “taken away and sold on” by “jealous” or “disapproving” family members.³³

Meanwhile, the curricula of the workshops proscribe the use of any technical settings other than the zoom function, let alone teaching even basic image editing techniques because these are time and resource intensive, and “good results are not guaranteed.” A Lensational program manager who told me that “it is futile to teach aperture,” stressed that he had no interest in “aesthetics:”

Far more powerful is the process of looking through the camera, when you’re confident in making pictures, you’re confident as a person; that skill of photographing is far more important for me to teach. I tell them to make twenty portraits, [to get] the experience of 20 people saying no to you (these are soft skills); walk x steps in this direction to take a photograph without the camera, then go back and do it; so remembering details, being alert. Photography is just an excuse, these skills are exercising your mind, [they are] team-building, leadership exercises and activities which you

31 I am quoting the PTF facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in January 2019.

32 See PhotoVoice, 2016. *Facilitator’s Guide*. Amsterdam: <https://rutgers.international/resources/photovoice-facilitators-guide/>

33 These words were used by a Lensational facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in October 2018.

*subconsciously learn, using photography or visual studies as a medium. The actual image is not important.*³⁴

These diktats come to dominate the kinds of spaces, times of day, and ways in which participants are able to photograph; and the subsequent manner in which their photographs must circulate and be interpreted.

On Lensational's website, a visitor can thus click through them in the hundreds. Many are candid (some to the point of blurry) images of women and girls taking or looking at photographs, or engaged in manual tasks like cooking, selling small wares, and carrying water in the slums, villages, beaches, and big cities they live in. Others are studied images of women and girls pursuing physical activities with traditionally masculine associations such as skate-boarding, rowing, jumping, and riding motorbikes; landscapes like the ocean at sunset and mountains in the mist; and natural elements like waterfalls, rocks, flora, and fauna. They are browsable in digital galleries titled "Yam Festival Ghana" (20 images); "Female empowerment" (17 images); "Landscape" (46 images); "Work" (7 images), "Abstract" (34 images); "Nature" (21 images); "Photographese" (141 images); "Wanderlust of school girls in Chennai: Purvai Festival" (15 images); "People" (96 images); "Black and white" (38 images), and "Latest exhibition" (46 images), although these categories sometimes change.³⁵ Alternatively, the images can be willed into view by a search engine with entry fields for keywords; date range; image city/state (US)/country; orientation (e.g., horizontal, vertical, square or panoramic); and pricing type.³⁶ Hastily framed snapshots and heavy textual documentation also mark the "Images of Foul Play" page on the PhotoVoice website, strengthening not only Michel's arguments but also the blanket position Claire Bishop takes in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), wherein she deems such projects incompatible with the production of art.

As a specific project, *Born into Brothels* received renewed academic attention in Pooja Rangan's 2017 book *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*. Here, "photography workshops among the children of sex workers in the film *Born into Brothels*" are connected to "live eyewitness reporting by Hurricane Katrina survivors, therapeutic attempts to facilitate autistic speech, and the rehabilitation of Asian draft elephants as painters" (2017, 5). Rangan argues that this impulse is pseudo-participatory. In practice, it is parasitic upon the lives of its subjects, and is part of "the

34 As told to me by a Lensational facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in October 2018.

35 Lensational, "Galleries." Accessed 10 March 2019. <https://lensational.photoshelter.com/archive>

36 Lensational, "Photos." Accessed 10 March 2019. <https://photos.lensational.org/search-page>

neoliberal hegemony of affective, virtuosic, and creative modalities of labor that are not recognized or compensated as such” (2017, 5). Rangan draws on the work of Marxist cultural critics to demonstrate how Briski’s humanitarian media intervention does not save its participants from exploitation as it claims and has been celebrated for doing, but “actively enlists them in an insidious form of child labor that is recast as self-actualization” (Rangan 2017, 27). She unpacks an early scene in which Briski,

[b]earing a bag full of consumer point-and-shoot cameras, contact sheets, and magnifying glasses... is led by several children to a locked room, where one of the children unlocks the door to admit her. This interaction poetically captures the trade-off embedded in Briski’s altruistic claim of setting aside her own artistic aspirations to foster those of her students [...] In exchange for lessons in photography, Briski’s students afford her literal and representational access to a space that is, by her own admission, indecipherable and impenetrable to a visitor. (2017, 30)



Figure 19: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 12:39 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

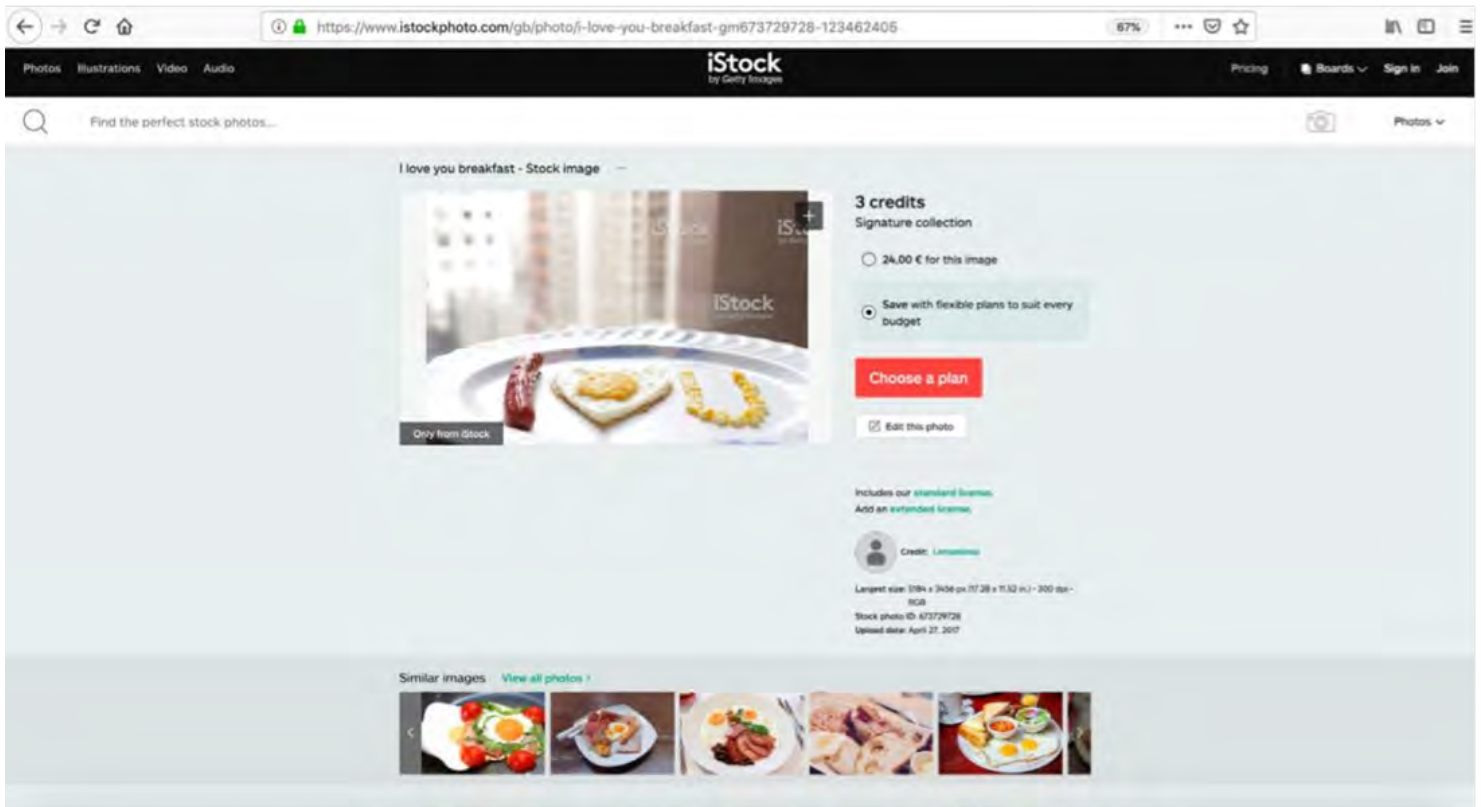


Figure 20: Photo credited to Lensational on iStock by Getty website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Rangan’s theoretically deft analysis of the exploitative economic exchanges, discourses, and predetermined aesthetics built into participatory media projects is, to date, the strongest invalidation of their authority to connect with—for the purposes of rescuing and rehabilitating—marginalized subjects.

In the context of the camera projects I studied, Rangan’s analysis casts Lensational’s relationship to Getty Images, one of the largest image banks in the world, with command over an archive in excess of 200 million assets, in an especially stark light. Paul Frosh has written about the discombobulating effects of the visual content industry on the makers, subjects, and viewers of images in its obfuscation of the lines of power that have brought them together. He admits that “the connection between the production and the distribution of photographs has been increasingly tenuous since the emergence of photography as a media profession” (2003, 192). However, recent trends, which include “the acquisition of historical archives and exclusive reproduction rights by transnational corporations that specialize in ‘visual content,’”

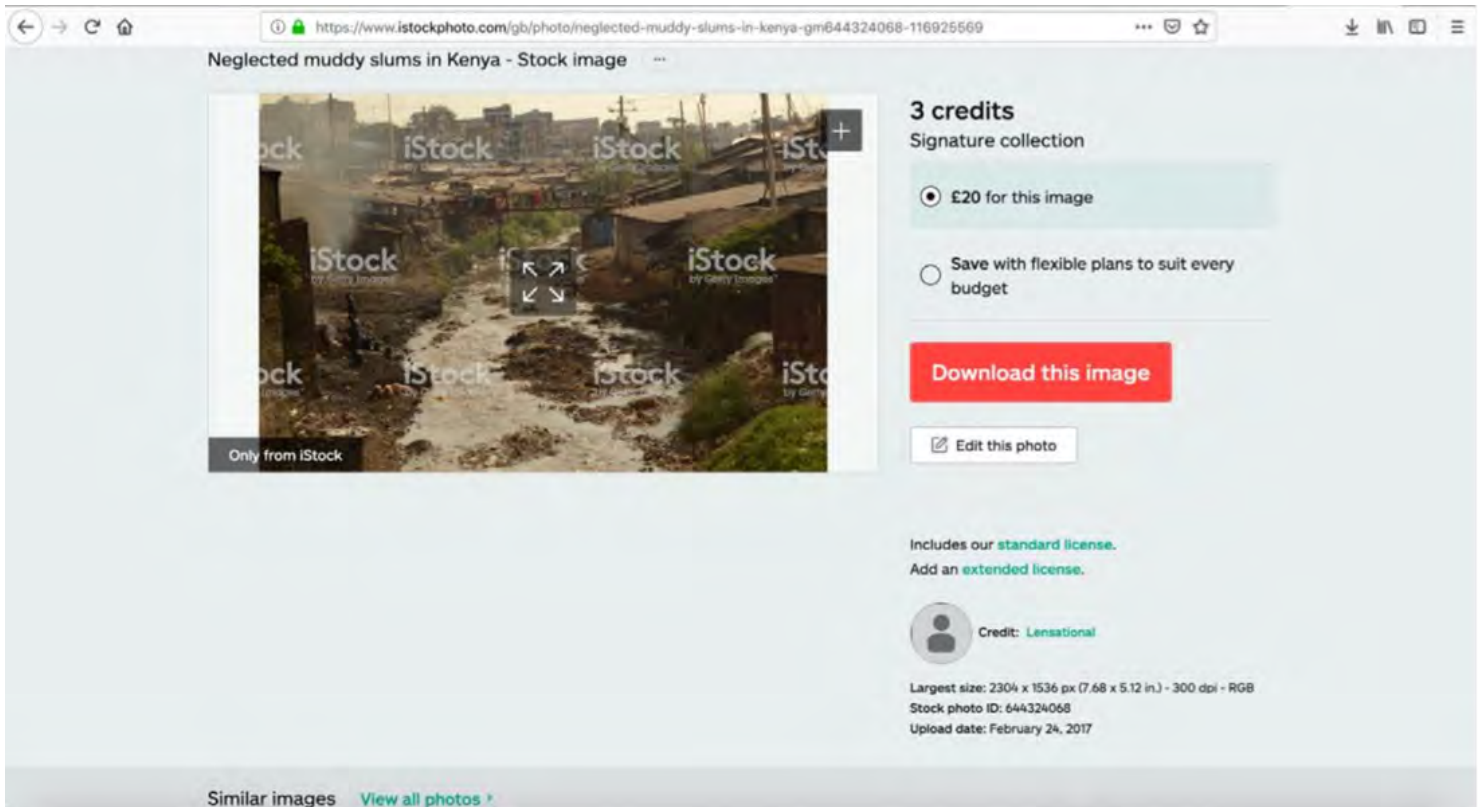


Figure 21: Photo credited to Lensational on iStock by Getty website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

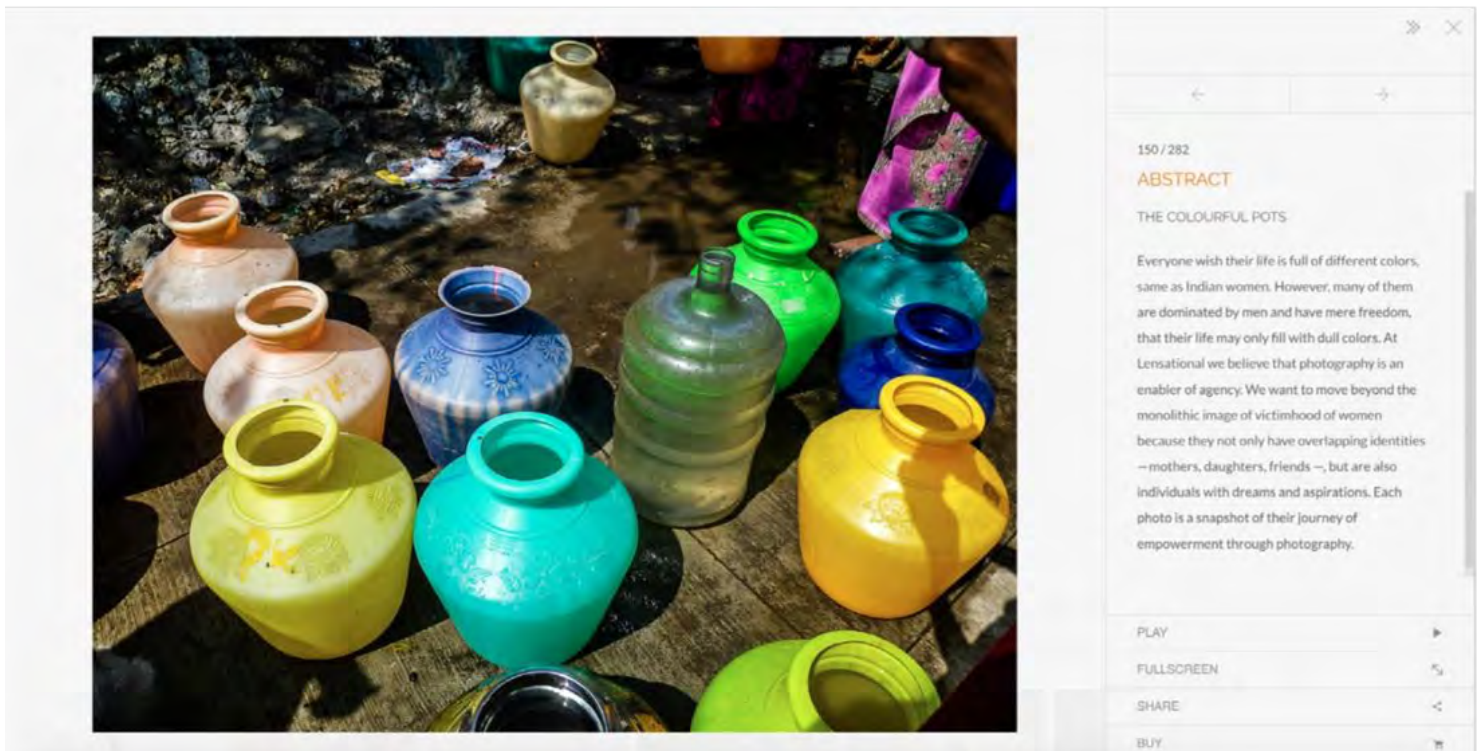


Figure 22: Photo credited to Lensational Photoshelter page. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

demand that “the complex material and symbolic specificity of images” entirely give way to “abstract universal, *content*.” An image entering into this industry is thus severed “from the context of its initial production, circulation, and consumption,” and reinscribed “within the overarching system of commercial exchange” (Frosh 2003, 192).

Moreover, Frosh insists on linking the visual content industry to imperialism. The former “draws increasing quantities of visual material into its orbit, with the aim of dispersing that material to more and more consumers across the world, to larger and more lucrative markets” (2003, 203). Towards this end, the large stock agencies, while continuing to push and profit from “straightforward” images, have “diversified somewhat from the generic stereotypes of the 1970s and 1980s both to more abstract ‘fine art’ and conceptual images and to images that address ethnic minorities and other previously underrepresented groups” (2003, 204-205). As such, Lensational’s offer of authentic images of and by women in the Global South is dictated by the demands of the industry it is claiming to take on. And ironically, its aim of making these women more visible is undercut by its embrace—by means of an exclusive contract—of Getty Images, a company whose interests, actions, and finances are “hidden from the public that consumes its images” (2003, 208), and certainly also from the women making and appearing in the images.

In fact, Lensational does not follow a consistent policy of crediting every image to the person who took the photograph. On its website and on Getty’s iStock page, some photographs are accompanied by a caption that includes the photographer’s first name, but many have no named photographer. Although this might be intended to protect the women in cases where the publication of their identities would put them at risk, it means their professional opportunities are entirely tied to Lensational’s networks. Sometimes, there is a credit line naming the image’s title and photographer, but it does not match the name of the person in the caption underneath. “The Skater, Bangladesh by Shumi” and “Shooting Smile, Bangladesh by Shobe” are, for example, both accompanied by the claim that “50% of revenue will go directly back to Aisha to support her and her family—equivalent to two months’ income for them.” It has obviously been copy-pasted from a template, and has yet to be corrected.³⁷ Such an administrative error might seem slight but against the slick competency espoused by Lensational, it signals the replaceability of one girl with another, and thus the overdetermination of the figure of the young brown female subject who is to take a photograph and receive money from its sale.

37 Lensational. “Skating, Girlhood, Bangladesh.” Accessed 4 September 2019. <https://lensational.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Bangladesh/G0000UH1URkUP9C4/10000JkWcdkERmVM>

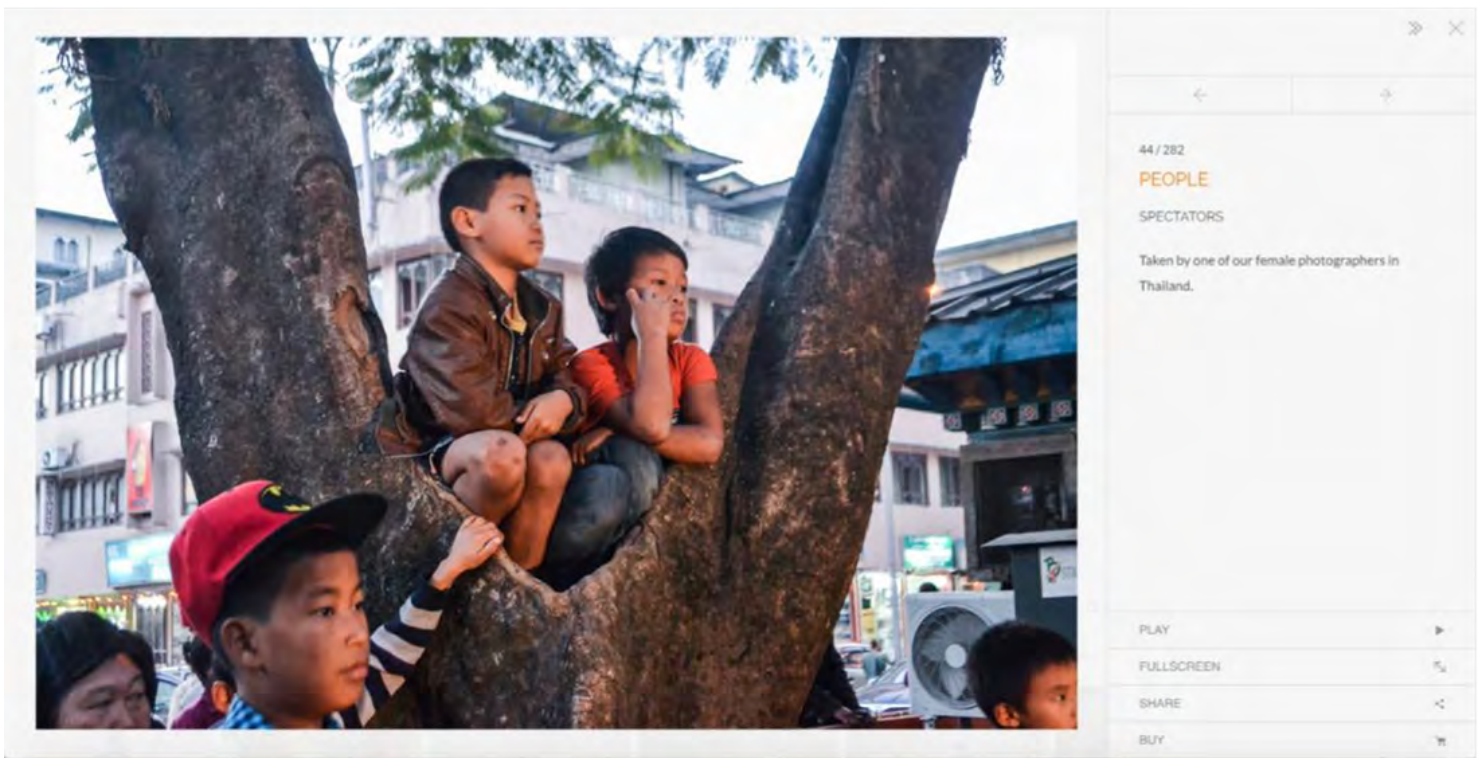


Figure 23: Lensational Photoshelter page. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

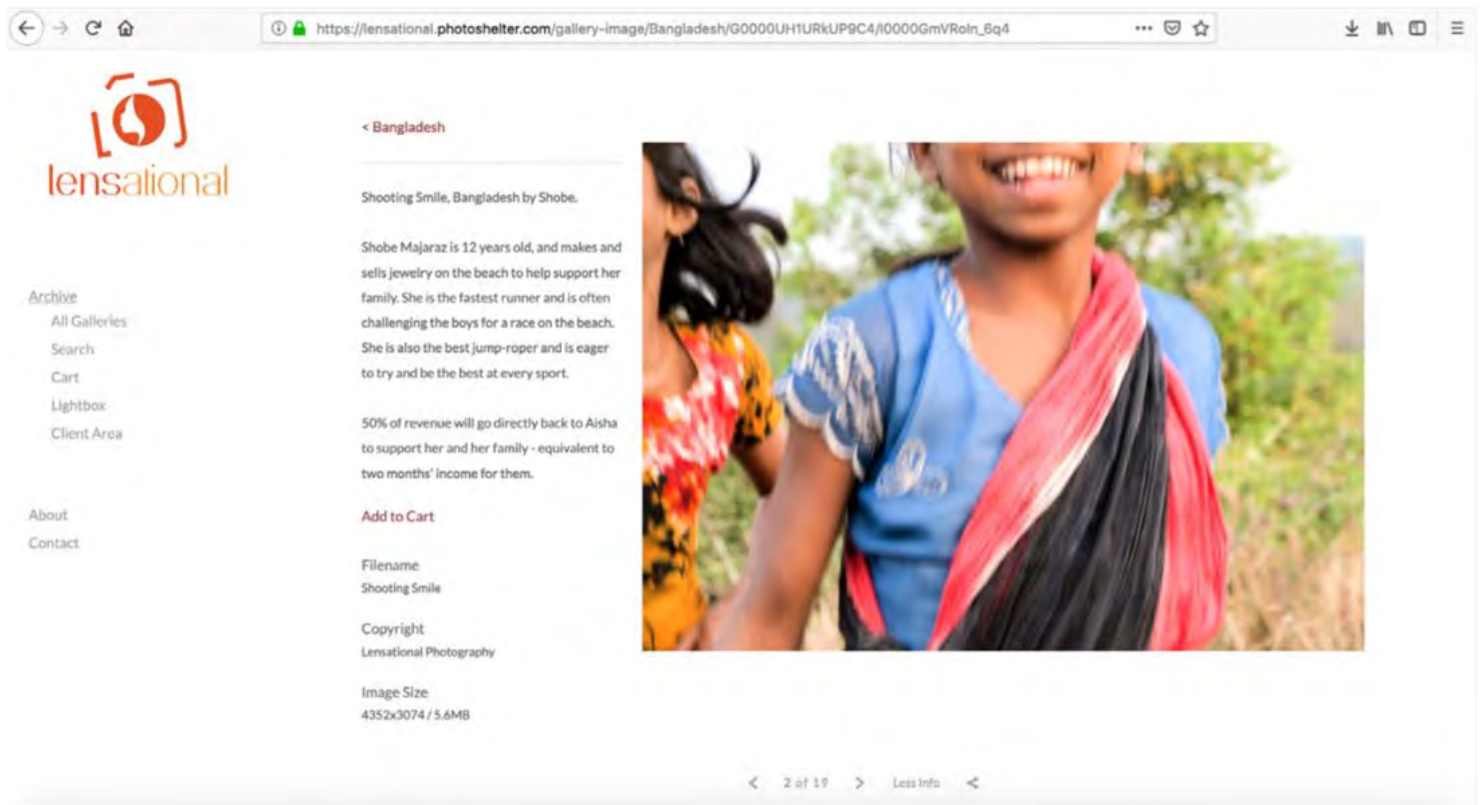


Figure 24: Lensational Photoshelter page. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

If Lensational thus makes itself an obvious target for Rangan’s arguments, they can also be brought to bear on “Ladies Only,” lauded on *Intersectional Feminism—Desi Style!* for asserting “a unique claim to an authentic representation of the lived realities of Dharavi.” Whilst striving “to deconstruct the male gaze as well as the racist, casteist and classist realities the images taken in Dharavi seem to portray,” the project is dominated by the organizer’s name, photographs, and words.³⁸

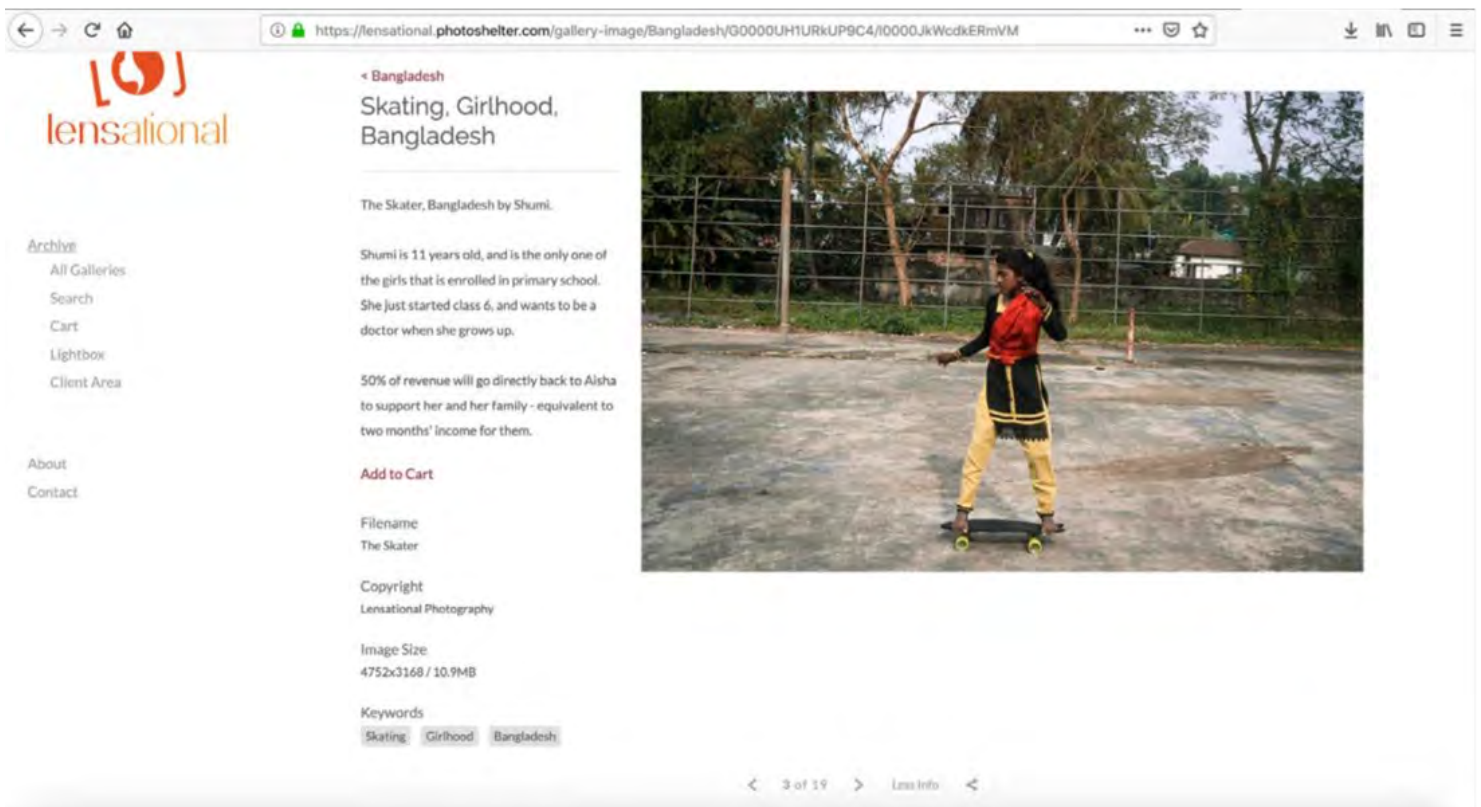


Figure 25: Lensational Photoshelter page. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

This propensity for untrammelled instrumentalization and commodification also courses through PTF’s exhibition at Alsisar, which its organizer nonetheless claimed was a complex organizational effort. She told me that “it was one of the first attempts at something like this for the festival, from concept to installation, so we had to work around a lot of challenges in getting it installed.” These included improvising on her initial desire to “hang the photos on the walls of the village” after being “advised to do it inside the Palace walls instead,” although she did not elaborate on the source and reasons for this advice. They “ended up with a wall of all the photos hung together,

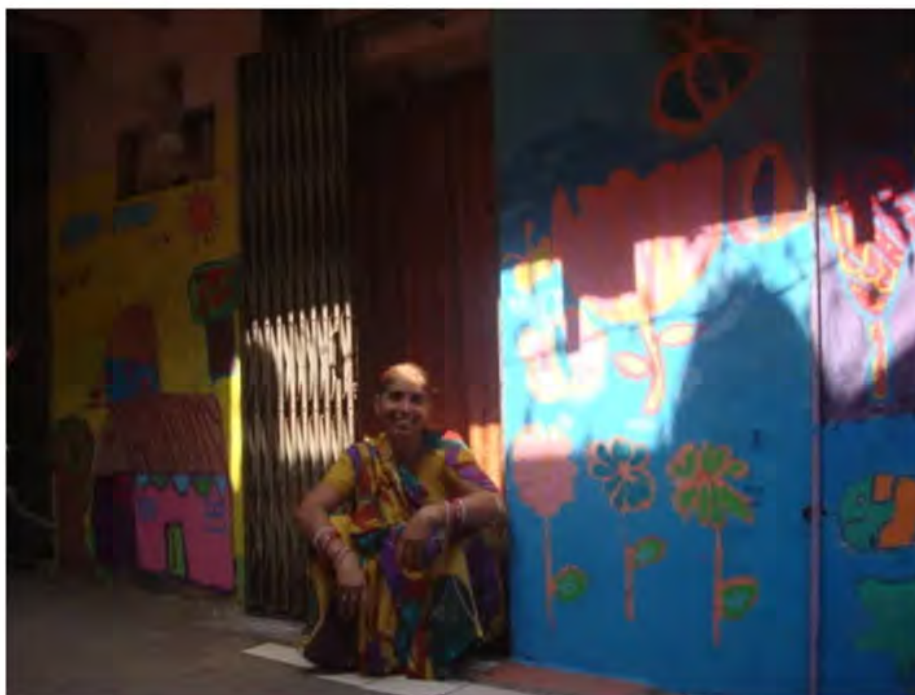
38 See Ananya, 2017. “Dharavi Art Room – Ladies Only, Stories For All,” *Feminism in India*. Accessed 19 July 2019. <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/10/25/dharavi-art-room/>

which created a mural type of result.” She added that “the participants were highly engaged in the process but were not exposed to the final exhibition until after the festival, and unfortunately, I had already left so I did not get to see their reactions.”³⁹

<https://feminisminindia.com/2017/10/25/dharavi-art-room/>

From August to October 2013, *Dharavi Art Room* interacted with the women residing in Shivshakti Nagar, Dharavi through a series of interviews. This was followed immediately by an intensive photography workshop with five women: Amrita, Anuradha, Kaveri, Nirmala and Shobha. The images were collated into a beautiful collection titled “Ladies only- stories for all”.

“Ladies only- stories for all” is an attempt to deconstruct the male gaze as well as the racist, casteist and classist realities the images taken in Dharavi seem to portray. Most importantly a journey into understanding and celebrating womanhood and claiming a space not just for surviving but for being and for thriving. The proceeds from the sales of the photographs are shared with the participating women.”



Credit: Aqi Thami

Figure 26: Excerpt from article on 'Ladies Only – Stories for All' as seen on Feminism India website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

39 PTF facilitator, email to author, 14 January 2019.



Figure 27 (top): Photographing the Female exhibition at Magnetic Fields Festival 2017 in Alsisar. The photograph was taken by the author's sister.

Figure 28 (left): Photographing the Female exhibition at Magnetic Fields Festival 2017 in Alsisar. The photograph was taken by the author's sister.



Figure 28 - 34: Photographing the Female exhibition at Magnetic Fields Festival 2017 in Alsisar. The photographs were taken by the author's sister.

The lackadaisical approach to installing the exhibition and the admission that its collaborative element was not present throughout perhaps explains how the exhibition came to entail such disconnect. The subject matter of the photographs sat strangely amidst a poolside setting; likewise, some of the photographed women were themselves perched on a deck-chair, standing shyly by the water's edge, or crouching by a bush. They do not seem convinced that they are allowed to be there. The wire, clothes-pegs, and poster-boards used to display the photographs, and their clustering in the quietest corner of the festival, appeared flimsy, temporary, and miserly against the historic and ornate walls and sprawling grounds. Or perhaps it was the other way around, and they instead accentuated all its flaking paint and chipped pillars.

The photographs' subjects and makers were left hanging in mid-air, as if existing beyond time and space. And glances, postures, edges, shadows, and annotations, which might have been playful at the time of making the photos, accumulated a

melancholic, lonely affect, with some even taking on a hint of menace. The printing, enlarging, retouching of their photographs exacerbated their distance from the people, spaces, objects, and networks that provided the meaning and anchoring they did have in the world. All of this happened despite the organizer's insistence that she was allowing "the work of these girls to be seen in a context with established photographers from all over the world," and making "a conscious effort to... not make their lives and work exist in a vacuum."⁴⁰ I was told that "the audience generally loved it and showed great interest when passing by," and the very mention of "passing by" suggests a casualness of execution, whereby the attendance and viewing of the photographs was left to chance. Indeed, an attendee of Magnetic Fields told me that she and her friends were herded into the exhibition while waiting for a concert to start, where they distractedly tried to make sense of what registered as a confusing visual experience, in much too short a space of time.

Conclusion

The exposition of old and new tyrannies in this essay is not intended as a rebuke to my colleagues at the conference where I first began to formulate these thoughts, nor to the interlocutors who, in the years that followed, have shared presentations, impressions, documents, and images with me. Rather, it is an effort to keep pace with their projects and to connect them to wider histories and geopolitics, even if this has meant zooming in on slippages and ruptures. And yet, such an exercise need not only be about looking twice at a typo on a webpage or staying with a seemingly casual aside made by a facilitator. It could entail noticing a child's scribbles down the side of an album, or the delighted conspiratorial face of a woman experimenting with the camera in her bedroom mirror. To dwell on these moments and instances is to grasp the contingency of photography, the spark that is produced when the camera is wielded by unexpected hands, or when images circulate in unexpected settings. As such, the work of scholars like Azoulay and Rangan, and the playfulness, skepticism, and irreverence of the *Foot Soldiers* continues to prove generative.

40 Photographing the Female, "Collaborations." Accessed 21 January 2019. <https://photographingthefemale.com/collaborations/>



Figure 35: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 1:26 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.



Figure 36: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 0:57 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

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