



# EXPLORING YOUNG HEARTS AND MINDS

AN INTERVIEW WITH BILLIE JD PORTER

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**B**illie JD Porter, a young British documentary filmmaker and journalist, presented a talk and film screening at the Public Library in Dhaka and at the Rangpur Shilpakala Academy for the young audiences of the 10th International Children's Film Festival Bangladesh 2017. She is the author of several acclaimed documentaries such as *Secrets of South America* and *Secrets of China*. In Bangladesh, she hosted exclusive workshops for young filmmakers and visited different initiatives in the remotest corners of Bangladesh to ensure women empowerment. Billie, during her first visit to Bangladesh, talks with the Star Weekend about her journey as a documentary filmmaker and her experience with the young Bangladeshi filmmakers and film enthusiasts.

**You have started your career in filmmaking with documentaries. What inspired you to be a documentary filmmaker?**

I actually became a documentary filmmaker by accident. I was, in fact, a writer specialised in writing on music. I also worked for one of the most prominent British music magazines called NME. However, I always liked watching documentaries and documentaries by Louis Theroux were a great source of inspiration for me. I grew up watching his documentaries which were very much character led, featuring experts highlighting the facts and quite immersive as he focused on people, culture and society. In several of my works you will get the reflection of his filmmaking style.

**You have spent times with Bangladeshi youngsters enthusiastic about film and filmmaking. How did they respond when you shared your experiences with them on making documentaries?**

It was a great opportunity for me to get introduced to so many talented and potential filmmakers who participated at the Children's Film Festival. I also visited Rangpur and held a workshop about filmmaking. While I was discussing about the way of storytelling in a non-scripted film, I gave the students a task of pitching ideas for a documentary film. I was really impressed to see that most of those students proactively participated and came up with so many brilliant ideas of making films on the topics like climate change, environmental pollution,

child marriage etc. The participants of the Children's Film Festival were also incredibly talented. One of the participants presented an idea of filming the lives of the flower sellers and flower cultivators. The idea was to film their lives, and how they grow and sell flowers; a flower is an object of happiness and celebration but these poor people, who make a livelihood out of them, live quite a difficult and modest life. In fact, every single idea they pitched in the workshops definitely could be made into films.



**Your documentary *Secrets of China* is a remarkable feat of social analysis. What is your observation about Bangladesh's society, its youth and the state of women empowerment?**

I guess both these countries are changing really very rapidly. Industries are growing and everywhere there is a huge rush of money and development. However, I really liked the hospitality of Bangladeshi people. Wherever I went in Bangladesh, the people I met were so lovely and welcoming that I thought that this place could be a heaven for the filmmakers. I would really love to make a film on Bangladesh, its welcoming people and vibrant culture. Regarding youth and women empowerment, I have already witnessed some remarkable progress. While I was talking with some female students of BRAC

University, I met some innovators who have developed sanitary products for women made of water hyacinths which are far cheaper, handy and bio-degradable. I observed that the young women I met there were very much conscious about their contribution, duties and responsibilities towards the society they live in.

**You also visited EDGE (English and Digital for Girls' Education) clubs run by the British Council in Dhaka and Rangpur where underprivileged girls have been getting support for education. What is your observation about their progress?**

The young girls I met there were very grateful about the fact that they have been given a laptop and they have been taught English with great care. Most of them did not know about a laptop before the project. Even I am the first foreigner they have ever seen in their lives.

The most amazing thing about the project is the teachers have been imparting the knowledge about the dangers of child marriage through digital and English education. These young girls are communicating these lessons to their parents and the village elders. I believe that this kind of innovative way of disseminating knowledge can bring about a positive social change.

**There is a perception that making documentary films is not that financially viable. What is your message to the young Bangladeshi filmmakers in this regard who are enthusiastic about filming documentaries?**

Actually filming documentaries does not need that sophisticated technology. In fact, some of the greatest contemporary documentaries have been shot on phone cameras. But the filmmakers need to focus on the style of storytelling. If you can produce a good documentary, currently there are a lot of platforms like Netflix which can purchase your products. Besides, the NGOs around the world often hire documentary filmmakers to film their development projects.

**Finally, what would be the theme of your first documentary if you were a Bangladeshi documentary filmmaker?**

Hahaha.... actually I need to spend a couple of months in Bangladesh to give you this answer perfectly. Probably, I would like to make a documentary on the issue of women empowerment in Bangladesh.