



# Born into Brothels: The Strife of One Woman to Get the Children Out of the Brothels in India: An Analysis of the Leadership Theories and Traits

Payal Cascio\*

Lafayette Educational Foundations and Leadership, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, USA

\*Corresponding author: Payal Cascio, Lafayette Educational Foundations and Leadership, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, USA, Tel: 3374821000, E-mail: Pxd1426@louisiana.edu

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## Abstract

This study utilizes the implications of the various leadership theoretical models that are reflected throughout this award winning documentary "Born into Brothels," especially in the demeanor of its director Zana Briski, and its varied characters who are involved in the making of this Oscar winning documentary. It makes an analogy between the six different leadership models that are analyzed in this study to the leadership traits and skills that are displayed by the characters of this documentary. As the documentary progresses the readers get a sense of how this film is characterized by a sense of strife and the unconditional dedication of Zana, to pursue her dream against all odds and to just get the children who are born into the brothels of Calcutta, India out of there. The personalities of the children are varied and cheerful, and speak to the viewer at a personal level. The various leadership theories that are discussed in this review transpire to highlight all those traits and skills of the director and the children that are frequently mentioned in most theoretical constructs of leadership. It adds a realistic perspective to the otherwise purely theoretical implications of the theories defined. It demarcates the mechanisms of organizational and structural changes that are needed to provide an impetus to a stagnant situation. Zana's efforts to bring the plight of these children to a global pedestal are remarkable and commendable. The display of the various leadership constructs that play out as the film unfolds validate her skills and traits as they imply to the enrichment of research in the field of education, leadership and mass communication.

directed by British photojournalist Zana Briski and a U.S. film editor Ross Kauffman and was shot in 2004. The initial playback music and visuals of this documentary quickly transport the viewer into a different realm of reality. It is a reality that is hard to fathom for a westerner, who take for granted certain everyday necessities like running water, electricity, and most importantly, free education as a basic right of all children. This however is not the case in all countries. Education in India is a privilege and is not a mandatory right of all children. The film is shot in the city of Calcutta now known as Kolkata which is the capital of the state of West Bengal in India. It is a state that has produced profound national leaders and political activists in India, people of high caliber and dignity; nevertheless, it is also notoriously known for its sprawling slums, red light districts and the depleting state of its once beautiful structures. Briski, the director expresses her interest in studying the lives of the children of these brothels, children who are born into these seedy, dingy and hopeless conditions, through the lens of her camera and the cameras that she hands to each one of the children that she has selected for the purpose of this documentary, to get an idea of what their lives are like, and the lives of the other children that are born and being raised in these brothels and by these brothels. Briski's goal in the making of this documentary is to get the children out of the brothels through formal education.

This narrative documentary follows the lives of certain children who were born to prostitutes in Sonagachi district, and is an insightful piece of work that is thought provoking and reflective of so many factors in our own lives. The girls featured are Suchitra, Tapasi, Shanti, Puja and Kochi, and the boys are Gour, Manik, and Avijit. Zana Briski, the director shadows these children through their daily lives and tasks that seem daunting for children of such young age.

**Keywords:** Child education; Leadership theory; Situational model; Cross cultural approach; Servant Leadership; Team leadership

## Introduction

"Born into Brothels," is an Oscar winning documentary that begins with the sights and sounds of the congested, murky and chaotic streets of Calcutta's Sonagachi red light district. It is

## Significance and application to the leadership analysis

Author chose this film for review because it sits close to my heart at a personal level.

Author is an Indian by origin and as a young girl growing up in India author often heard stories of these children in the brothels by my parents as being the unfortunate ones to be

born in such deplorable conditions. These children are not too far from the public eye in India and are very much a part of the Indian socio-economic system. However, what makes this documentary noteworthy is the level of intimacy that is used to investigate the daily lives of these children. It explores their perspectives on various issues that affect their existence; it is a kaleidoscope of their emotions, concerns and most of all their distinctive personalities. Zana Briski, the director of this film exhibits a variety of leadership styles throughout the movie, sometimes you notice some elements overlapping in the various styles that are displayed by her and especially as situations and her surroundings change.

## Body

With respect to the theoretical framework of the leadership theories, author will attempt to connect the director's personality which is Zana Briski's disposition as it evolves and transforms into the various leadership roles as the film progresses. Even the children have idiosyncrasies that can be identified in some leadership theoretical models, starting with the:

### Trait approach

Primary leadership scientific research tradition focused on traits that were understood to be inherent or transmissible qualities of the individual [1]. No doubt influenced by Galton's [2] work, most early researchers measured leader traits to be unquestionable properties that were present at the birth of a future leader. This viewpoint shifted in the first half of the 20th century to take into account all relatively enduring qualities that distinguished leaders from non-leaders [3]. Stogdill's [4] review cited confidence in judgment, speech fluency, interpersonal skills, and administrative abilities as stable leader qualities.

The trait approach in leadership applies the inherent qualities of an individual that are acknowledged to be dynamic in being viewed as a leader; namely, intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability [5]. The most fitting person for this role in the film is the director herself, Zana Briski. It is only the trait leadership approach that encompasses and identifies all the key elements that define Zana's personality, namely intelligence, determination, integrity and self confidence in Zana's personality. She is intelligent because she is able to gain the confidence of the children along with their families and witness their daily life at such a personal level. She is articulate and confident enough to secure free access to the most tabooed area of the city, a forbidden place where the shunned reside. Her integrity is demonstrated in the way she encourages these children to pursue what is best for them, by meeting with the staff of local boarding schools, working through the red tape and bureaucracy of the Indian administrative system. Author commend her on her efforts to have all these children tested for HIV, to fight the lines at the passport office for Avijit, and to promote the cause of these kids in the photo gallery in New York by bringing awareness to their plight. Zana in my opinion

is a perfect fit for the trait approach leadership style as she displays all the attributes that define this approach. Author find Puja Mukherjee to fit within the trait leadership model as well. She is one of the girls in the film and a daughter of a prostitute to be an extrovert, confident and receptive to the lives of the other children around her and is able to clearly articulate her thoughts and provide feedback on what she thinks of her friends. Puja Mukherjee is also another girl, 10 years of age who seems to have a bit more than the rest of the children in the brothel. Nevertheless, her future rests in the brothel too as is perceived by the director, since both her mother and grandmother are in prostitution. She seems to be the most expressive and outspoken of the group of children. She is opinionated about her friends but has the best intentions for all. These traits in my view fall within the range of the trait leadership approach.

### Skills approach

In his classic work on managerial skills, Mintzberg [6] listed specific interpersonal skills (i.e. the ability to establish and maintain social networks; the ability to deal with subordinates; the ability to empathize with top-level leaders) as critical for managerial effectiveness. Even earlier than 1973, scholars scrutinized the role of broad interpersonal skills, such as empathy, social skills, and tact, in predicting leadership emergence and effectiveness (see Bass, for a review). Managers, executives, and human resources professionals clearly understand the importance of strong interpersonal skills. A common theoretical framework linking psychological and social skills with leadership efficacy is essential to guide research and the valuation and training and development of organizational leaders.

Under the skills approach, Zana Briski perfectly amalgamates the human skill element in her line of work as the leader of the pact in Sonagachi. The human skills approach is a leadership style that is described at length in Northouse's book on leadership as a way to channelize one's leadership abilities by establishing a sense of worth and trust among your subjects; by providing them assistance and giving them a sense of empowerment, this approach also focusses on the leader's ability to be sensitive to the values, morals and customs of the environment they are practicing in. As is evident in the film, Zana is well-trusted by the children, they are all fond of her and is seen as an effective teacher. This statement is further confirmed when Puja states in her interview with the reporter at the exhibition in the Oxford Book Store on Park street, "We learn everything she teaches us!" Among the children, Kochi, Manik and Puja all bear a strong sense of human skills in their personalities too. They all verbalize their emotions in a very mature and sensible way and feel a strong sense of compassion and empathy for their counterparts.

### Situational approach

Scholars who have researched the variety of situational leadership theory models point to psychological maturity as it appears to reflect the motivational state of a person via the individual's level of self-worth and assurance. This aspect is

argued to be associated with an achievement orientation and a willingness and ability to accept responsibility [7]. A relationship-based approach would focus on the dyadic relationship between the leader and the follower. The critical question of interest in this case would be: What is the proper mix of relational characteristics to promote desired outcomes? Investigation within this domain could focus on recognizing the distinctiveness of dyadic relationships (e.g., trust, respect, mutual obligation), evaluating reciprocal influence between leaders and followers, examining how the dyadic relationships are associated with outcome variables of interest, and researching how effective leadership relationships can be developed, maintained, and combined into units of leadership structures [8].

Zana also fits well into the high supportive (relationship) and low directive (task behaviors) model of the situational approach [5]. As she states clearly at one in the film "Author not a social she is in. She is motivated to improve the conditions that these children are in and is worker or a teacher!" is a clear proof of the fact that is a situational leader, whereby her style of leadership changes with the environment constantly striving to work towards their cause. She praises the children, listens to what they have to say and encourages them to think for themselves, as in the instant where she asks one of the girls to tell her why she dislikes or likes a particular picture.

### Team leadership model

The discipline of team leadership emanates a sense of dignity for future research advances, both in terms of science and practice. Leadership in team-based organizations identifies some of the major challenges and opportunities regarding future advances of team leadership [9]. They include fully tackling multilevel issues; cross-level effects; design, methods and measurement issues; studying team leadership in context; and the possibility of hybrid leadership forms in teams. Leadership clearly does not happen in a void and this is principally the case with teams. Team composition and team types vary from context to context and pose different leadership challenges. These circumstances at different levels shape and influence team leadership. Normally a social viewpoint of organizations is powerful, energetic, multidimensional, vague, information-rich, and communication dependent. At a basic level this means a more concentrated effort to get into the field as researchers.

As is noticed in the film, Zana makes a great team leader for the pact of children she is toiling for day in and day out. She is respected by the children and her instructions are implemented on and executed without delay. Robert Pledge, the owner of a photo agency in New York City, who is later introduced in the movie by Zana to the children and their work also assumes the role of a leader for a brief segment of the film but his actions are impactful since his recommendation place Avijit on a more global platform of being recognized for his photography talent in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Avijit's peculiar camera angles with a keen attention to detail, colors and symbolism of a picture truly stand out in his photographic work. Pledge, also takes on a team leadership role by

identifying Avijit, as an exceptionally talented boy whose photographic work Pledge insists be sent in as an entry to the World Press Photo Foundation. He also makes a proactive effort to travel all the way to India to visit the children and their families. He is seen in one scene communicating Avijit's photography talent to his grandmother in a very polite manner and encouraging her to have Avijit send his work to an international foundation in Amsterdam.

### Cross cultural leadership

While the occurrence of leadership is commonly thought to be universal across cultures, the way in which it is deliberated is usually perceived to be culturally specific. Contradictory perspectives exist in the leadership literature concerning the transferability of specific leader behaviors and processes across cultures [10]. While these leadership qualities are unanimously recognized, there was also considerable variation across societies [11]. This disparity provides important information to organizations developing compliance programs, integrity programs, or codes of ethics on an international basis, by identifying areas where organizations may either have an easier time implementing programs or where they may meet greater resistance.

Developing execution plans that take into consideration variation in the degree of endorsement of ethical leadership may help to ensure a smoother transition process, and also to gain quicker and greater acceptance of these initiatives [11]. Finally, accepting modifications across societies can be useful in the design of codes of ethics that are receptive to norms of other countries, yet do not violate hyper norms of ethical conduct [11].

Cross cultural leadership is one of the most pertinent theoretical frameworks that author can identify Zana Briski's leadership role in. Specific aspects of charismatic/transformational leadership are compellingly and unanimously endorsed across cultures [12]. This is apparent by the fact that she is able to adjust so well not only to a foreign culture and country but continued to have the perseverance to survive and move on with the documentary in spite of the resistance from the locals, and harsh and uninhabitable conditions of the Sonagachi red light district. She portrays all characteristics that embody a transformational leader and a transactional leader.

### Servant leadership

From a definition standpoint, leadership has been described in many different ways. To that end, Northouse (2007) suggested that several different constituents can be acknowledged as being fundamental to the phenomenon of leadership: (a) Leadership is a process, (b) it involves influence, (c) it occurs within a group context, and (d) it involves goal attainment. Recapping his review of several dozen definitions, Northouse defined leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3). Bennis described that leaders have an inclination to share some, if not all, of the following three ingredients: They are instituting a guiding vision, have passion,

and act with integrity. When leaders subscribe to stewardship or servant leadership principles, they work to serve their followers for the purpose of achieving organization objectives. In essence, the leader sees themselves as servants to those they lead for the purpose of increasing the capacity of others to do their work [13].

Zana emulates the role of a servant leader as is evident in the scene where she pursues acquiring a ration card for Avijit even though she is frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the Indian policies and procedures. Her servant leadership traits are obvious in the scene where you she is naturally exasperated by run around given to her by the Indian officials and dealing with the red tape that exists at all levels of the Indian bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, she is diligent and dutiful to the cause of these children and continues to have them tested for aids, organizes a photo auction in New York city to raise funds for the children through their own photographic work and also goes to the extent of having them all tested for HIV to get them admitted to the Sabera foundation, which is a boarding school in the same city where the children reside. Zana's endless and selfless efforts are a proof of her pristine intentions for bettering the lives of these children.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the numerous references made to the leadership abilities of Zana and a few other characters in this documentary, it is apparent that this highly applauded film bears a starring footing to the various leadership theories that can be extracted from its different segments and characters. Author personally, am highly impressed by the human factor that plays such a central role throughout this movie in getting goals accomplished and objectives achieved. Zana's relentless struggle to work through the congestion of the Indian red tape and bureaucracy, and her fight to go from door to door looking for a decent school that will admit the most tabooed children of that particular society is noteworthy. She transforms from being a regular photographer to being a servant leader who is intrinsically motivated to get these children out of the brothels. Even though she faces several hurdles and obstacles on her path, her leadership skills shine through each time and every effort on her part pays off. She is able to obtain a passport for Avijit even though at one point it seemed like everything was going to fall through. She is able to convince Avijit in pursuing his dreams and stressing to him that this is the only way he can get out of that brothel. Her transformational and transactional leadership skills are obvious at several significant points of the film. Firstly, her transactional leadership skills are apparent when she is seen haggling with the men at Ration card office to get the stamp that she has been needing, then once again when she is talking with the women at the admissions office of the boarding school and the nun at the catholic school. She is also able to get the two boys Avijit and Manik admitted into an all-boys school that is run by Tim who runs Future Hope in Calcutta which is a safe haven for children of sex workers. Zana, through her relentless efforts in procuring a passport for

Avijit, after an 8 hour wait at the passport office line is finally able to travel to Amsterdam, Netherlands with Avijit for the photo exhibition as she had so hoped for. In my observation of Avijit, I would like to make a special mention the part where he assumes the role of a transformational and a situational leader at the exhibition in Amsterdam, particularly when he is seen describing the depth behind his pictures to the children there, he is seen as being intelligent and articulate enough to verbalize his thoughts and provide supportive

Zana's efforts do not go unnoticed, as the photo exhibition in New York City and in Calcutta at the Oxford book store are both a great hit. They draw the attention of the Indian and the American media and some noted personalities in the field of photography who support her cause and render substantial feedback and patronize her strife. This film provides a great overlay of scenarios that an aspiring leader can be motivated by and learn from. Considering the grim and shady backdrop of the whole documentary which may initially not come across as the most uplifting circumstances to receive inspiration; however, after viewing the dreary pictures in the first few scenes of the film, it is the sound of children's laughter and being playful that quickly changes the mood of the viewer. It is captivating to hear sounds of joy, and children chuckling when the introduction is to the contrary. This movie is an inspirational piece that amalgamates various dimensions of a true leader. Leadership theories in all of its expansive scope can be seen very much at play and in practice with the progression of the film. The director along with her entourage of children, and other supporting members of the team whether in India or America are all seen utilizing the various forms of the leadership paradigm which are too lengthy and in depth to mention in this review.

Author really enjoyed watching this documentary, more so since author is an Indian too by origin and am well aware of all the existing taboos, restrictions and everything else that is either forbidden or looked upon as shameful in the Indian culture. It has brought forth the fact that with the right kind of leadership tools, and proper application of the most effective leadership traits, is what makes you a true leader. The documentary clearly yet passively signifies the importance of the right leadership traits such as persistence, articulation, extroversion, collaboration and compromising. Any goal, no matter how implausible is achievable. It just takes the right kind of leader to make it all possible. Zana is that leader who was willing to put in her blood and sweat; and devote countless hours in achieving that common goal of as she put it, to just get these kids out of the brothels. This film exceeded my expectations since I was not expecting this one person, Zana who is also a woman to actually make any rectifications in uplifting these children from their deplorable condition. This was more so a surprise to me since Zana was able to achieve success in an area of the city where most women are petrified of even stepping into. Yet in a country like India where women are given much less credit and attention than men since it is still a somewhat chauvinistic society the director was in actuality able to mobilize a major change in the endless cycle of poverty and impoverishment for the sake of these precious children.

The overall leadership message of this movie is not only inspirational and motivational but incredibly uplifting. It shows strife for a goal that seems unachievable, where determination and believing in your subjects is the key to accomplishing what you always believed in. Zana's success is also proven in the fact that all these children in her documentary are now pursuing goals of education and a life out of the brothel. Author was so touched by this film that author went ahead and researched as to where these children are now? According to "Update on the Kids of Calcutta," July, 2010.

Avijit, 21, as of 2010 was attending New York University's Tisch School of the Arts where he was studying filmmaking. He is described as being a diligent student in this article and held two-part time jobs on campus. He was able to visit his family back in India after being away for two years.

Kochi who was 17 in 2010, was found to be studying at a private boarding school here in the United States and was also interested in studying filmmaking. She was last known to be considering attending universities in London, England since Europe is much closer to India than the U.S.

Shanti, completed her high school studies with Future hope, and was looking forward to going to college in Mumbai.

Gour, decided to further his education by enrolling in conversational English classes.

Puja, is working at a medical diagnostic center and is married to a doctor.

Manik, expressed an interest in photography and was supposed to finish high school in March 2011.

Binod, was studying fashion design at a university in Lucknow and was soon close to graduation.

Tapasi, in 2010 was attending beauty school in Calcutta.

Madan, was pursuing filmmaking in 2010.

Cross cultural leaders have to emulate the role of a charismatic and a transformational leader in regards to the cultural sensitivities of the country they are a part of. They have to carefully evaluate a situation before they choose to act on it. Zana Briski [14] is observed walking around the streets of Calcutta with an interpreter at all times in the film. This action on her part further endorses the findings of a recent study done on cross cultural management style that placed immense importance on subordinates who were nationals of the host country in aiding to bridge the cultural gap between a foreign leader and its host nationals [15-17].

Zana's leadership role and her achievements to date are commendable and her success in investigating and exploring the lives of these children is admirable. She has done a service

to the lives of these children that has changed their future in a way and to an extent that initially seemed improbable.

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