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by Sarah Barnett

Bringing Hope

When Kiwis Kerry and Annie Hilton decided in 1999 to settle their family in Calcutta, they thought they knew what they were in for. Kerry did the reconnaissance, found a place, and they moved their four children in to begin helping their neighbours – only to find that they had moved onto the doorstep of one of the world's biggest red-light districts, Sonnagachi. The lesson? Don't recce only during daylight hours.

They stayed put, however, and a few years later, while stocking up on plonk, TV host Evie Ashton came across a jute wine bag made by Freeset, the business that the Hiltons set up as an alternative venture for some of the area's 6000 sex workers. You never stop researching in this business – Ashton and TV news editor John Sinclair headed to Calcutta, where Sinclair had already spent several months, and filmed this half-hour doco (the DVD, soon to be released, has two hours of extra footage).

"[The Hiltons] are trying to create self-determination for these women," Ashton told the Listener, "so they can do an honest day's work that they can be proud of, earn money that goes straight into their accounts so their boyfriend or their pimps can't take it out, and they have a compulsory savings plan." In an area where well-meaning Westerners come and go, the fact that the Hiltons have set up a sustainable business has been crucial to earning the trust of some of the most beaten-down women you'll ever see on screen.

The 6000 sex workers serve 20,000 men, who trawl the aisles of women who earn 25-50 cents. "It's utterly disgusting," says Ashton, "and of course a lot of the men are married, so it's all to do with the spread of disease as well as being a function of society: to be prostitutes at the feet of these men."

Which all has the potential to be depressing viewing – and might have been without the very engaging Hilton family. So, not depressing, then, but a little humbling. And that never hurt anyone.