

World View Book of the Year:

Half the Sky

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

Every socially responsible citizen must read *Half the Sky*, a compelling account of the plight of women and girls around the world. The title, taken from a Chinese proverb that says “Women hold up half the sky,” is meant to educate readers that half of the human population is facing severe and outrageous oppression. Pulitzer Prize-winning husband and wife authors, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, transport the reader to different regions of the globe, from Cambodia to Cameroon to the Congo. In these countries and others, the authors expose the injustices that occur in human trafficking, female genital cutting, honor killings, and similar forms of oppression. The stories are so vivid that the book, while moving, is often painful to read. Despite this discomfort, it is critical for all of us - both women and men - to educate ourselves about what the authors call the great moral issue of the 21st century.

Kristof and WuDunn witnessed an inconceivable amount of violence and persecution and often were not able to stand by as uninvolved journalists. One such occasion was in the town of Poipet, Cambodia. At the time, Kristof was traveling with *New York Times* videographer Naka Nathaniel, and they interviewed two young women who had been enslaved in the sex trade. These women, like many others, were being held against their will, were unable to ask the corrupt authorities for help, and were nervous about going home because of the shame they would face. When Kristof asked them pointedly if they would like to return to their families if they had their freedom, the girls jumped at the chance. Faced with the opportunity to change the course of two young lives, Kristof decided to intervene and offered to buy the girls from their brothel owners. He proceeded to take the girls back to their villages, where each was met by her family and friends with open arms. Unfortunately, the solution did not prove to be this simple. One girl had become addicted to methamphetamine while in Poipet - a method of control often used by brothels - and returned to the brothel of her own accord just one week after coming home.

Although *Half the Sky* is rife with stories of tragedy, there are also many moments of triumph. One such account is the story of Edna, a Somali woman who had undergone female circumcision against her will as a young girl. At the insistence of her mother, she had been forcefully cut in Somali tradition. When her father found out he was furious, and his anger fortified Edna to become an advocate for women’s health. Edna was lucky enough to gain an education by sitting in the back of her brothers’ tutoring lessons and subsequently attending a school for girls in neighboring Djibouti. She continued to pursue her education and career in England and the U.S. and became a successful U.N. official for the World Health Organization. For Edna, however, that was not enough. She returned to Somalia and put her entire savings into building a maternal hospital. The hospital now stands as a beacon of hope in a country torn by civil war.

Half the Sky convinces the reader that the oppression of women and girls is the most important human rights issue of the 21st century. Like slavery and ethnic genocide in the preceding centuries, female oppression is an injustice that is often heinously ignored by the masses. This book may do something to change that fact, as it brings to light the many issues faced by women worldwide. Kristof and WuDunn end their account with a chapter titled “What You Can Do.” This section is especially helpful because those who read *Half the Sky* cannot help but take action. It is the hope that this action will help reduce the injustice women and girls endure worldwide.

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