



Half the Sky:

Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide

By Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

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Reviewed by Meg Wilkes Karraker and Miriam Wilkes Karraker¹

In *Half the Sky* Pulitzer Prize winners Kristof and WuDunn take the reader from seeing the horrors inflicted against girls and women around the world as issues peculiar to certain societies to a worldwide crisis of gendercide. For example, they write of the 3 million girls who are sex trafficked, not as part of an economic system of sex for sale, but as a system of human slavery. They never offer simple platitudes, but describe the complicity of the police, border guards, and others who benefit from the exploitation of children's bodies. While acknowledging that prostitution is likely here to stay, Kristof and WuDunn present arguments in favor a law enforcement strategy which emphasizes changing police attitudes and providing social services. Their analysis reveals the complexity of these problems, including how remedial efforts sometimes backfire and how Western ambivalence and partisan political agenda complicate and often scuttle efforts to effect real change.

A major theme of the book is that the prosperity and well-being of whole societies is inextricably linked to female emancipation. The United Nations and the World Bank now realize the tremendous potential of investment in girls. Bettering the lives of women through education and economic opportunities such as micro-lending are powerful strategies for fighting poverty worldwide, increasing economic productivity, but also improving health and nutrition and reducing infant and maternal mortality and morbidity.

Kristof and WuDunn avoid a "drama of victimization" (p. xxii). They write with respect for their informants, naming each girl and woman and permitting each to tell her own story in her own words. The photographs accompanying the stories present the girls and women with dignity. We found ourselves cheering for the girls who were able to escape from bondage, setting up small businesses and sometimes returning to their communities. However, we found ourselves wanting to know more about these girls' relationships with family and other intimates. We sadly noted the very regrettable omission of any discussion of gendercide against lesbians, such as "corrective rape" sanctioned in some African societies.

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Some readers will recall Oprah Winfrey's interviews with Kristof and WuDunn. *Half the Sky* is well suited for a popular audience and we see a broader one. First, academics will find rich, meticulously documented qualitative data that 'show' rather simply 'tell' about one of the most pressing social problems of global society. Second, Kristof and WuDunn empower readers to move beyond shock and despair. They recommend and provide resources for concrete actions for social change, ranging from sponsoring an individual girl to joining a network against injustice. They also include a detailed appendix listing organizations that support women and girls.

Kristof and WuDunn's objective is to recruit readers "to open [our] heart[s] and] join an incipient movement to emancipate women and fight global poverty by unlocking women's power as economic catalysts" (p. xxii). Like the authors, we "have been honored to sit at [the] feet" of the women in *Half the Sky*, who have "inspire[d us] with their courage and dedication to a cause larger than themselves" (p. 258).