

# Global Gender Inequality and the Empowerment of Women

## A Discussion of *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*

**Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide.** By Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. New York: Knopf, 2009. 320p. \$27.95

*Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* is a powerful journalistic account of the oppression of women worldwide, and of the ways that some women and men have struggled against this oppression and discovered new forms of economic empowerment. The book—in its eleventh printing in less than a year, and with testimonials from the likes of Angelina Jolie and George Clooney—is also a publishing sensation. *Half the Sky* brings much attention to an important and timely topic, and it creatively combines narrative, analysis, and policy prescriptions, and so we invited three prominent scholars of gender inequality and development to reflect on the book's strengths and weaknesses: Ayelet Shachar, Uma Narayan, and Valentine M. Moghadam.

### Ayelet Shachar

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**H**alf the Sky is a powerful and unsettling book. It is unsettling for at least three reasons. First, the book documents through individualized stories some of the most gruesome human rights abuses that girls and women still face worldwide: gang rape, forced prostitution, sex trafficking, to mention but a few examples. Anyone who believes that feminism is passé, with little left to offer by way of making the world a more egalitarian and just place, might wish to reconsider their position in light of the evidence of gender-based violence presented in this book.

Second, the style of argumentation involves a mixture of outstanding journalist reportage with a moral call for action: “We hope to recruit you to join an incipient movement to emancipate women and fight global poverty by unlocking women’s power as economic catalysts” (p. xxii). This mission of recruitment is pursued by a twofold method: bearing witness to the dark side of humankind’s treatment of women, including almost graphic descriptions of sexualized violence and maternal childbirth injuries; and more uplifting quasi-epic narratives, which testify to women’s survival, perseverance, and civil action—

overcoming their pain and suffering, helping themselves and others, turning horror and despair into redemptive and empowering experiences. This particular stylistic choice by the authors leads them to represent women in binary terms: victims turned heroes; young girls rescued from the hell of sexualized objectification in cheap brothels only to find hostage in the secure, but no less gendered, life of traditional marriages. The narrative continues with stories of unprotected intercourse leading girls as young as fourteen or fifteen to a living-dead pariah existence, suffering from severe injuries and complications during childbirth. The lethal combination of women as sexualized objects contrasted with maternal injury and suffering relies on a familiar iconography—the whore and saint, virgin and mother. These archetypes are plentiful in the book.

Third, the authors are upfront about their aspiration to turn this book into a social manifesto for a “new emancipation movement to empower women and girls around the world” (p. 244). To that end, they wish to enlist you, the reader, as an effective supporter who will not only donate money but also volunteer on the front lines. This focus on individualized, bottom-up social action, as opposed to large-scale “treetop” governmental reform projects, is most evident in the book’s closing chapter. Here, a concluding subsection directly preaches “Four Steps You Can Take in the Next Ten Minutes” (pp. 251–52). This particular method of recruitment can best be described as *feminist-evangelical*—oxymoron notwithstanding—offering the movement’s participants a stake in “a story of transformation. It is change that is already taking place,

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and change that can accelerate if you'll just open your heart and join in" (p. xxii). This blend of conviction and advocacy also helps explain the authors' urgent appeal to overcome the "God Gulf" that plays out particularly harshly in debates about American foreign policy as they relate to population and family planning (pp. 131–45). This strange mixture of unflagging zeal and progressive pragmatism also informs the authors' call to establish cooperation across the "bickering lines" of left- and right-wing politics, different branches of feminism, and secular and religious activists, in "combating what *everyone* believes is abhorrent" (p. 26, emphasis in original).

The book is most powerful when its first-rate journalism speaks truth to power and promotes unorthodox solutions to difficult problems. The weaker sections are found when authors move beyond documentation and venture into the world of explanatory factors and causal relationships. Especially for those accustomed to the nuance of academic debate, the questions posed in some of the chapters (e.g., "Is Islam Misogynistic?") and the answers offered ("no, but . . .") appear both overloaded and oversimplified, as well as implicitly steeped in a "west and the rest" dichotomy. For example, consider even the following pragmatic assessment: if modern Muslim nations wish to enjoy the fruits of economic development, greater freedoms must eventually be afforded to women. This bears a subtext that is no less revealing than the stated conclusion. As Kristof and WuDunn explain, "[t]his [the status and role of women] is the greatest handicap of Muslim Middle Eastern societies today, the flaw that bars them from modernity" (p. 160).

It is here that we encounter a crude set of either/or choices: equality versus culture, tradition versus modernity. These are important—and admittedly complex—topics that have rightly been given much academic and public attention in recent years. But in this book, the presumed incompatibility of culture and gender is mostly taken as a given rather than viewed as a relationship in need of critical exploration and evaluation. This stance is indicative of what I above describe as the book's feminist-evangelical conviction. It is perhaps most explicitly stated in the context of a discussion of China's emergence as "a model on gender issues for developing countries: It evolved from repressing women to emancipating them, underscoring that cultural barriers can be overcome relatively swiftly where is the political will to do so" (p. 206). Here, the authors assert, "If we believe firmly in certain values, such as the equality of all human beings regardless of color and gender, then we should not be afraid to stand up for them: it would be feckless to defer to slavery, torture, foot-binding, honor killing, or genital cutting just because we believe in respecting other faiths and cultures" (p. 207). Powerful words, but are they fully convincing? Perhaps, if we take extreme examples like these and further assume that culture and religion only breed repression and injus-

tice. But that is a partial picture at best, even for women; for religion can also serve as a basis for resistance, a path for empowerment, a tool for justifying political action against the status quo, precisely the things that the *evangelical* side of Kristof and WuDunn's branch of feminism seeks to accomplish. So in the spirit of overcoming the God Gulf, the book, or a supplement to it, would be more complete if the same commitment to objective and inquisitive reportage that informs the bulk of the book were also applied to exploring whether, and under what conditions, women have found strength and power to change their world through reforming religion from within—rather than in opposition to it. In fact, a careful reading of some of the more moving stories in the book reveals that this process of change is already more prevalent on the ground than what is described at the rhetorical level by the authors.

Beyond its shock-and-awe effect, the book's most intriguing and innovative sections involve a discussion of possible "out of the box" solutions to empower women through bottom-up grassroots activism that have proved fruitful where other efforts have failed. Here, the authors astutely utilize an array of real-life examples: the establishment of a flourishing local school by a gang-rape survivor in Pakistan; a successful UN official with a high-flying international career, who returned to Somaliland, building—against all odds—a maternity hospital that delivers quality maternal care and trains a loyal staff of care providers; the local development of empowerment programs written with the input of villagers to demonstrate that collective action and democratic deliberation can make a real difference, leading the participants themselves to find new ways to change long-established marriage traditions that once imposed penalizing gender-based harms on young women. The book praises these grassroots efforts just as fiercely as it articulates a disdain for top-down aid programs that aim to do good but end up being wasteful, culturally insensitive, and unable to reach far enough into the countryside where they are needed most. Criticizing the spending of precious money on large international conferences and fleets of SUVs for foreign-aid workers, the authors convincingly plead in favor of local efforts that generate communal support. The book also promotes the theme of self-aid through extensive discussion of microcredit loan programs and social entrepreneurialism. This is fully in line with the book's general emphasis on individualized salvation and bottom-up remedy, the same spirit of feminist-evangelism that saves one soul at a time.

This focus on grassroots efforts is part of a larger motto that runs throughout the book, which can easily be summarized as the preference for "changing reality, not changing laws" (p. 32). This approach certainly has its charms, prime among which is the possibility of motivating individuals to make their own contributions (volunteering time, donating money, and so on). But turning the campaign of achieving justice and dignity to every woman, everywhere

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on the face of the earth, into primarily a “grassroots war” also risks mammoth shortfalls. Surely some degree of governmental, international, and transnational cooperation is required. Furthermore, actual policies, laws, and budgets need to be defined and resources allocated in order to ensure women are granted their due share, namely “half the sky.”

The authors clearly understand this point. Indeed, the pragmatic side of their analysis is adroit. For instance, early in the book, they offer what amounts to an economic pricing-theory logic: if we want to see a drop in sex trafficking, make it more costly through measures such as heavier regulatory controls and law-and-order-style enforcement. Similarly, the book’s final chapter spells out specific initiatives for the new movement to press, initially in the United States and, ultimately, throughout the world. These initiatives include a \$10 billion effort over five years to educate girls around the world and reduce the gender gap in education, a global drive to iodize salt in poor countries (a measure designed to prevent impaired brain development in fetuses when the mother’s body lacks enough iodine during pregnancy), and a \$1.6 billion project to eradicate obstetric fistula as a first step toward addressing the larger problem of maternal mortality (the latter takes a staggering toll of one life a minute) (pp. 246–249). But these goals require more than just individualized, bottom-up action. To fulfill them, the power of states, multilateral organizations, and international (governmental and non-governmental) players must be recruited as well.

The best evidence for the significance of legal and institutional factors is found in the book itself: during World War I, more American women died in childbirth than American men died in war (p. 116). This pattern of maternal mortality changed, and radically so, once women gained the right to vote. With their newly acquired political voice, “their lives also became a higher priority” (p. 198); patterns of legislation shifted accordingly, leading to a sharp rise in public health spending that in turn rapidly reduced maternal mortality rates in America. This is a *political* story that involves coordinated policy and implementation decisions that go well beyond the self-aid approach. Similarly, the authors are right to point out that we can anticipate improved conditions and opportunities for women once societies make the calculated decision that their lives are “worth” investing in—through a more just distribution of food, shelter, education, access to employment, healthcare, legal protection, and so on. And that decision is easier to make today, more so than ever before, because “[t]he economic advantages of empowering women are so vast as to persuade nations to move in this direction” (p. 250). This is the happy end toward which the book steers. Whether this is achieved through individual action, political pressure, or sheer economic calculation ultimately becomes secondary. The authors’ primary goal

is to elicit support for a major social transformation that, in their black-and-white vernacular, “is turning women from beasts of burden and sexual playthings into full-fledged human beings” (p. 250).

Although I have expressed reservations about the choices made by the authors in their representation of women (namely, the focus on documenting the brutality and vulnerability they still face while ignoring almost all other aspects of women’s lives, the pervasive binary images that the book unwittingly reproduces, and the amalgamated feminist-evangelical position), *Half the Sky* successfully discharges its core mission. It persuades that now is the time to register the struggle for gender equality in the developing world as a major moral challenge of the twenty-first century. Precisely because of the unforgiving accumulation of widespread injustice and suffering the book evidences, *Half the Sky* unsettles to the point of making indifference evaporate. And that’s a significant achievement worth celebrating. And there is no better place to begin than flipping back to the page describing those “four steps you can take in the next ten minutes.”