

Book Review

Half the Sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide

by *Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn*

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More than 300 years have passed since Aphra Behn pioneered a career as a professional woman writer, and numerous brilliant women writers have publicized their opinions and experiences since then. Virginia's Woolf's striking vision of women having their own rooms and of them fulfilling androgynous qualities seems to have been achieved in the last century. Alongside the active female scholarship and the feminist actions taken politically and socially, equality between men and women is considered as 'common sense' in most western countries, and even in other countries as they become more westernized. The majority of students in the university where I am teaching tend to grow up without experiencing gender discrimination at home and often find it difficult to realize that such discrimination still exists in the world, until they reach their final year and start 'going out' to explore their profession in the society. It is said that the world is getting narrower and that people in different regions are getting closer, but it is also felt that we do not know what is 'really' going on in this world, especially for women in other parts of the world. In Seoul, one of the busiest capitalist cities, where people are, to a large extent, forced to run in the rat race, it is easy to be content with what has been achieved when it comes to social issues - gender, labor rights, the environment - rather than to take further action concerning what still remains to improve. While the 20th century is often characterized as having witnessed dramatic changes and improvements in women's status and in their freedom in most of the western countries and some other developed countries, it is often overlooked that it was also the period when sexual images of women be-

came widespread and flourished for commercial purposes more than in any previous century.

Half the Sky is a wake-up call in this situation, in that this book, as a vivid and passionate report about the diverse situations where numerous women around the world are oppressed and struggling to survive and to maintain minimal human dignity. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who are the first married couple to win a Pulitzer Prize and other prizes in journalism for their coverage of China as *New York Times* correspondents, illuminate what is happening to women who are living in the poorest circumstances around the world. This book is an inspiring and challenging testimony of what they have seen in their journey as journalists. They discovered that tens of millions of women, including baby girls and young girls, die every year, a fact that is not even reported in international nor in local news. There are so many women who disappear, who are oppressed, and who die because of various reasons such as poverty, male-centered customs, corrupt politics, distorted ideas of masculinity and femininity, and because they are deprived of medical care and education.

Their witness covers wide-reaching areas including China, South Asia, and Africa. While addressing the harsh reality and problems women are currently facing throughout 14 chapters, this book mainly addresses three issues: the sexual abuse of women, maternal mortality and morbidity, and the importance of women's education and the financial help with women's independence. The first truth that this book reveals is about contemporary slaves, i.e. women who are kidnapped, sold and abused for sexual transaction. One of the most significant contributions this book makes is found in the various personal stories that it reports. The heart-breaking experience of Meena, an Indian Muslim who was abducted to be a prostitute, is just one of the examples. She was beaten and raped by pimps, forced to work as a prostitute in a brothel for many years, and had two babies, who were both taken away from her. She managed to escape from the brothel but had to watch her children brought up and abused as sexual instruments, before risking her life to free her children from the brothel. She had to fight against not only the pimps running the brothel, and their violence and threats, but also the corrupt policemen, criticism from her family, and most of all, the cultural prejudice that condemned her and her children as 'ruined and

dirty'. This book not only denounces the fact that millions of women around the world are forced to live as sexual slaves against their own will, but also asserts that the globalized trade in women for prostitution largely depends on the perspectives on prostitution in each country and the policies consequently made. The sexual harassment and abuse, violence, and rape imposed on women are rooted in a disparaging attitude toward women and the deep fear of men about women's ability. This incredibly appalling reality of the sexual enslavement of many women, including teenagers and children, is followed by another shocking truth, the fact that one woman dies each minute while giving birth. This book particularly addresses 'fistulas', the modern-day leprosy, which millions of women living in poverty in countryside in developing countries are suffering from and dying of. While demonstrating how dangerous this fistulas is to women, and that numerous women are suffering from the infection, this book does not forget to emphasize that this maternal mortality and maternal morbidity are not solely caused by poverty but are also caused by people's negligence concerning women's health and women's rights. Sri Lanka has significantly reduced maternal mortality during the last three decades, a success which is based on their respect for the life of mothers, and contrasts with many other poor countries, where women are just considered as 'objects' to be replaced.

As a crucial way to improve women's status and their situation, this book addresses the importance of educating women and testifies to the striking improvements that education has brought to women and to their future. Also, as Virginia Woolf emphasized a century ago, women's situation is largely related to their financial dependence on men, and this book shows successful cases where women can access a small loan, demonstrate their talents, and achieve financial independence. As the title suggests, this book describes the harsh and cruel reality that numerous women are facing around the world, but also tells of courageous, inspiring and patient challenges and actions to change this harsh reality, to improve their situation and to achieve their human dignity. There are so many women, ranging from an American high school teenager, to Edna, the ex-first lady of Somalia, who dedicate their energies, talents, money, and lives to restoring the trampled rights and dignity of women around them.

In conclusion, this book emphasizes that women have played a great

role in contributing to economic development in many countries, producing economic prosperity. This sounds like a good strategy to encourage the governments who seek for economic development to use women ‘as great potential resources’ but I wonder if this is different from a sort of pragmatism, i.e. the assumption that human beings need to be useful. Although this idea is understandable, actions should be taken to deliver women from harsh conditions because of the plain fact that each of these women is a human being. Still, one of the most precious points that this book reminds us of is that what abuses and hurts the weak and vulnerable, are ‘people’, but what heals and restores them, are ‘people’, too. In this capitalist world, funding and financial support are bound to be crucial, but in truth, they should be combined with respect and understanding for local cultures and people, and with patience and practical policies cooperating with local culture. Thus, it seems to be natural that this book not only shows us the harsh reality for women and the sources of help for them but also urges us to join in with those providing help. The methods they suggest to us are very specific, reminding us of the importance of the power of a person. The invitation to join the helping group is not just because there are so many women who need ‘help’. More than that, the invitation becomes too strong to decline because it wakes us up and is a cold reminder that ‘the women’ and ‘I’ share the same destiny. Surely, the stories that this book testifies to both the reality we do not wish to see and the changes we wish to see. At the same time, it is powerful enough to energize us for the practice of Gandhi’s saying, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

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