

Half the Sky: Only Part of the Story

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In his endorsement of the book, Tom Brokaw said, “*Half the Sky* is a passionate and persuasive plea to all of us to rise up and say ‘No more!’ to the 17th-century abuses to girls and women in the 21st-century world.” Brokaw captures the book well as a *plea*, addressed to all of us, and against abuses that have been around for centuries. *Half the Sky* does offer a compelling presentation of stories of abuse matched by astounding accomplishment. Privileged, wealthy, secure, first-world readers will likely be humbled with the realization that the problems we face appear so insignificant when seen alongside the violence, oppression, demoralization, and degradation some women face in their daily efforts to survive. But even while we acknowledge the book’s potential for bringing certain issues faced by women to greater light, it is worth pausing to check some of the assumptions that undergird the book’s central argument.

The book has a compelling structure that obviates the otherwise inevitable sense that the problems presented are intractable or impossible to solve. Kristof and WuDunn use their journalistic skills to “lay out an agenda for the world’s women focusing on three particular abuses: sex trafficking and forced prostitution; gender-based violence, including honor killings and mass rape; and maternal mortality, which still needlessly claims one woman a minute” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, xxi). Each problem begins with a personal story. Often, but not always, those personal stories start with hardship, tragedy, or violence but result in triumphant empowerment of the courageous individual woman. Sometimes, however, the triumph is somewhat measured as the reality of a woman’s situation or cultural condition asserts its oppressive force. Always, the authors then situate the individual woman’s story in the global problem – revealing how vast some of the issues facing women worldwide really are.

One example from the book is the story of Saima Muhammad in Pakistan. Saima was “desperately poor, and her deadbeat husband was unemployed and not particularly employable” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 185). He beat her daily, and Saima was forced to send her daughter to live with a relative because she was unable to feed her properly. Saima’s situation was clearly dire. To make matters worse, her mother-in-law shamed her for not bearing a son. Kristof and WuDunn describe Saima as “dissolv[ing] into tears every evening” and “walk[ing] around in a daze” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 185). “It was at that point,” according to the authors, “that Saima joined a women’s solidarity group affiliated with a Pakistani microfinance organization called Kashf Foundation” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 186). With a mere US\$65 loan, Saima transformed her life. She became the entrepreneur of a thriving embroidery business, employing neighbors, providing for her family, and inspiring her daughter. Saima moved from hardship and

violence to personal triumph on the basis of what many Americans spend at the hair salon. Saima's story is just one personal example of how microcredit can make a difference.

The authors then discuss the role of microfinance more broadly in development. By providing a variety of financial services – such as savings, small loans (microcredit), and insurance – to the poor in local communities, microfinance appears to have tremendous potential for empowering individuals and addressing poverty. Kristof and WuDunn are realistic in their presentation, however. They note that social and cultural expectations of women may constrain the growth of some women's-owned businesses. They also note that microfinance is affected by the economies of the countries and may not be the panacea some development activists make it out to be. Moreover, other problems of poverty, such as health status and lack of education, at times force loan recipients to default on even very small loans. Microcredit often comes with unbelievably high interest rates (over 20% in many cases) leading some critics to suggest it is unethical. Indeed, there have also been studies linking microcredit debt default with the suicide of some loan recipients. Kristof and WuDunn mention some of these criticisms, thereby moderating a bit of the enthusiasm over the potential of microcredit to relieve poverty single-handedly, but they also unabashedly endorse the involvement of “absolutely anybody” in “arranging microloans to needy women like Saima” – by going to a Web site, which they provide (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 191). It is worth noting, however, that making a commitment to aid others does require more than simply going to a web site to make a donation. Not all microfinance organizations are created equal. Some might impinge unnecessarily on cultural customs, some might be coercive or otherwise unethical, and some might be admirable, locally based opportunities to involve distant, wealthy others.

After the personal stories and measured reality, the authors offer a second section in each chapter which chronicles a relief or service effort. Importantly, most of the examples portray everyday people who do extraordinary things against seemingly impossible odds. Each chapter, in other words, ends with the message that *this* problem can be solved and can be solved in creative ways that are often remarkably simple. The chapter on microfinance thus includes a discussion of CARE, an aid NGO that has met with some success facilitating short-term credit and savings associations among women. What is required is a commitment.

Indeed, the authors present their book as a moral argument. They hope to convince readers of the value in acting. The argument is based in moral psychology rather than moral philosophy. That is, the moral argument is an attempt to persuade rather than a reasoned account of the right thing to do. Nevertheless, the authors do appeal to humanitarianism and human rights in framing the issues. The aim, as Brokaw indicated, is to get people to respond and the authors hold that personal stories have a more reliable power to move others to action than statistics. This is not to say that statistics are not employed in the effort, however. As they explain, “Frankly, we hesitate to pile on the data, since even when numbers are persuasive, they are not galvanizing. A growing collection of psychological studies show that statistics have a dulling effect, while it is individual stories that move people to act” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 99). Statistics about abuse and

effective efforts to overcome it bolster personal stories and help to respond to the potential objection that one woman's story does not an issue make.

Half the Sky addresses the moral argument not to governments, regional governance structures, or even the international community. The authors appeal to individual readers – and in particular, individual readers with money – but it seems clear they hope to inspire even those of us with more modest resources to find ways to help those who have even less. It is easy to become overwhelmed when one comes to understand the extent of violence and abuse against women. In spite of this, the authors point out that the difference one person can make in the life of a single woman is an *important* difference. Turning away from acting at all simply because the problem is so extensive is shirking one's moral obligation. This point is explicit in response to the vast problem of human trafficking: “even when a social problem is so vast as to be insoluble in its entirety, it's still worth mitigating” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 45). Efforts to mitigate injustice ought to be built on careful study and testing of results, according to the authors, though research predictions also ought not to be oversold (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 244).

The book provides a powerful message and while I do not want to undermine it, I do want to suggest that there is more to creating a movement than convincing discrete individuals in wealthy regions of the world to give money through web sites or to become more informed. Movements also require transnational and global solidarities and international agreements. The authors' solutions do not quite reduce fighting maternal mortality, human trafficking, honor killing, and rape in war to issues solvable by individuals, but potential for global solidarities or transnational coalition are not as readily apparent as are the actual solidarities and coalitions around the world. Saima's case illustrates this. It was because of a women's *solidarity group* that she was somehow able to transform her life from tearful abusive misery to empowered family and community leadership. That solidarity is mentioned but perhaps the long-time collective efforts might also merit the media's attention. The authors offer four “principles,” with the caution that these principles ought not to be taken too seriously, to guide their movement and do include some element of coalition even if it is not about coalitional groups: (1) “Strive to build broad coalitions across liberal and conservative lines”; (2) “Resist the temptation to oversell” research predictions; (3) “Helping women doesn't mean ignoring men”; (4) “American feminism must become less parochial, so that it is every bit as concerned with sex slavery in Asia as with Title IX sports programs in Illinois” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 244). (More on this last point below.)

Whether as individuals or as part of solidarities, those who seek to help women in need ought to involve themselves in the movement from an attitude of humility. The oppressed have an experience and knowledge that ought to be respected. Those of us in positions of privilege who act out of good will to help others need to be careful not to presume that we have all the answers. We come from dominant, privileged groups, and often former colonizers in the areas of the world we now serve. We are also sometimes implicated in the current situation of oppression through our investments and consumer practices. Acknowledging that privilege and seeking the

knowledge that privilege has kept hidden are important steps in efforts to resist oppression. We ought also to confront our own contributions to oppressive systems and change our own “local” habits even while we seek to make an impact globally.

One of the greatest virtues of the book is the candor with which the authors confront some social problems. Without the least hesitation, they take on the power of religion. This power, however, is ambiguous. On the one hand, religion is the motive or justification for some of the violence perpetrated against women. On the other hand, religiously motivated individuals have been among the most effective actors for social change within communities. The authors acknowledge a good bit of these ambiguous relations, though more, perhaps, might be said about the effects of Christianity as well as Islam on women’s status. Christianity has, after all, contributed a great deal to create and sustain the systematic subordination of women and disdain for the female body. Given the power of faith communities in shaping at least some peoples’ lives, efforts to curb violence against women and gender-based oppression have to confront the influence of religion. As the authors declare, “If there is to be a successful movement on behalf of women in poor countries, it will have to bridge the God Gulf. Secular bleeding hearts and religious bleeding hearts will have to forge a common cause [. . .] it’s the only way to muster the political will to get now-invisible women onto the international agenda” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 143). Notice that the implication here is great: for a movement of this sort to take firm hold it must not only not be afraid to criticize the role institutional religion plays in maintaining unjust systems, it must also seek to engage actors or agents from within institutional religious organizations. The alliance will likely be quite thin as there is much about which fellow actors will disagree, but working together in spite of those differences is a step toward liberation.

The book ends with “Four Steps You Can Take in the Next Ten Minutes” that are different than the four principles guiding the movement. These four steps – set up an account at a people-to-people giving or lending website, sponsor a girl through one of the many organizations for that purpose, sign up for emails to stay updated, and join an advocacy network on-line – are concrete ways to “break the ice” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 252). In other words, Kristof and WuDunn intentionally set low expectations for us but they are expectations they hope everyone with at least a modest income can meet.

Throughout my reading of the book, I wondered about its intended audience. It is clear that in framing the issues discussed as humanitarian issues, they hope to appeal to a wide audience. They “hope to recruit you to join an incipient movement to emancipate women and fight global poverty by unlocking women’s power as economic catalysts” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, xxii). Although seemingly casting the net wide in order to ensure the largest possible recruitment class, there are a number of assumptions built into such a project. One of the most obvious is the presumption that we are not already involved. Another assumption, somewhat more disquieting, is that the movement is “incipient,” just beginning or in its earliest stages. Each of these is worth further scrutiny.

The first assumption, that the book is appealing to those of us not already involved, could be proven or disproven through a study of the responses to the book. The web site and the advance

press for the book flag it as momentous. Indeed, to have two noted journalists lend their weight to addressing some issues that have plagued women for centuries is momentous. Though, of course, there have been other very successful efforts – movements – to combat these very issues. I would like to suggest the authors have addressed their book to a fairly specific audience: wealthy Western women. The authors likely know that those of us who participate in some way in challenging abuses against women around the globe will see in this book many comrades in the struggle. The tales in the book were not unfamiliar to those of us who contribute to global women's causes, receive updates from organizations that pay attention to gender and human rights, and/or have traveled to some of the poorest countries in the world. Those readers might even experience a sense of separation from the book, a vague sense that this book was not meant for them. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, but the reason for that unease may be that the intended audience is somewhat narrower. As the authors suggest, “wealthy American women haven't been particularly generous toward international women's causes, but there are signs that that may be beginning to change. American women are now playing an increasingly important role in the philanthropic world, and ‘women's funds’ that support women and girls are booming” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 243). It seems, then, that the authors mean to target leisure-class women, to encourage a new involvement by a group that has traditionally directed its attention and resources elsewhere.

The second assumption, the assumption that may cause some of us to grit our teeth as we read and hear praise for what is admittedly important journalistic coverage of a variety of abuses women suffer, is that the movement is “new.” If one supposes that the three categories of abuses – forced prostitution and sex trafficking, violence, and injury and death in childbirth (xxi) – have existed for eons, and, well, they have, then I suppose it is accurate to call the public acknowledgement of the movement to end them “new.” Let's be clear, though. Women have fought these abuses individually and collectively for as long as they have existed. It truly is wonderful that the press has awakened to both the facts of the abuse and at least some of the efforts to curb that abuse. What should not be overlooked is the history of consistent, heroic efforts by women (and many men) to fight these and many other abuses of women. As I read, I often felt like I was both watching the unfolding of consciousness and witnessing the exuberant effects of that new-found awareness. But to assume that Kristof and WuDunn are on to something new troublingly overlooks what women have done and continue to do. This sense is compounded by their disparagement of the “women's movement” and their inconsistent rejection of calling the issues discussed “women's issues.” To take one small example, the four United Nations' World Conferences on Women beginning in 1975 in Mexico City and drawing tens of thousands of women to Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and finally Beijing (1995) demonstrate the global scope of women's movements. These thriving movements – coalitions of women from every corner of the globe – emphasized women's human rights, empowerment, development, and brought global awareness to the violence against women.

Kristof and WuDunn mean the book to appeal to all of humanity, even if I also argue that the book is primarily aimed only at the wealthy, hitherto apolitical women of the United States, but it

is also clear that the book quite boldly does not want to be connected to women's movements or to feminism. Kristof and WuDunn don't just attempt a moral argument for human rights causes; they also explicitly claim that we ought not to call the issues that make up that cause "women's issues" (although this is done inconsistently) and blatantly refuse connections to women's movements. I find this problematic for a number of reasons, some of which I will lay out here.

First, many of the advances they report and even some of the specific examples they cite are the result of women's movements. Again, Saima's cause is a good illustration of this (and by no means unique in the book or in the world). It was a *women's* solidarity group that gave her power and support to resist. The book has this uneasy sense that any of the good that is currently being done on behalf of women is a result of the kindness of single individuals far away who found some sort of purpose. This may be a function of the nature of the moral argument the authors try to make as well as their sense that at least some potential readers will be turned off by anything modified by the word "women's". But women (self-identified as feminists or not) have worked collectively to transform not just a few bad situations but society as a whole. What feminism does, and has arguably always done, is to see and reveal the connections between beliefs, language, social structure, and violence. More might be said to bridge the work Kristof and WuDunn call for and the work women's movements have already accomplished.

Second, the authors also endorse the claim that we do not need another conference, by which they mean that we do not need another World Conference on Women. While we should always be critical about how our development dollars are spent, those conferences not only set the stage for a book like *Half the Sky*, they were incredibly powerful tools to advance the global awareness and address the global problems of violence and abuse against women, the need for the empowerment and education of women, and the problems of sexual slavery and trafficking. Moreover, through coming together at the initiative of the World Conferences on Women, women's movements established networks to advance their ongoing struggles and join forces. For something like trafficking, these sorts of coalitions are crucial. It is not enough to fight trafficking in countries where girls are collected for transport across borders. It is also important that women's movements in receiving countries address the societal, structural, and sexist problems that facilitate the demand for trafficked women. Coalitions or solidarities among women's groups formed at those conferences and nurtured through transnational politics and activism have radically transformed the lives of individual women as well as the global perception of human trafficking. To disparage these movements in the name of creating a new movement is folly at best, and might be criticized as yet another form of sexist devaluing of women's work.

The U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 concentrated efforts on violence against women and created the Beijing Platform for Action. Only a year earlier, the UN had appointed a special rapporteur on violence against women. The conference participants and leaders detailed the numerous ways women are affected by violence throughout their lives and around the globe. The Beijing conference thus directly confronted issues previously obscured by seemingly more pressing global concerns. The Platform stated in no uncertain terms that rape

violates the “fundamental principles of international human rights” thereby affirming that women have human rights, that rape violates those human rights, and that rape is a gender issue. The Platform demands that national and international tribunals “address gender issues properly by providing appropriate training to prosecutors, judges and other officials in handling cases involving rape, forced pregnancy in situations of armed conflict, indecent assault and other forms of violence against women in armed conflicts, including terrorism, and integrate a gender perspective into their work”¹ because, let’s face it, some of these officials do not exactly have model records for treating women with justice and human rights either. The Beijing Platform for Action prescribed strategies for the prevention and prosecution of violence, many of which have since been adopted. For instance, rape and torture were added to the list of “crimes against humanity” for the war crimes tribunal in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The Rwanda tribunal also added “forced pregnancy” and “rape as a means of genocide” in 1997. These are huge changes in our international community, which had for so long accepted rape as a part of all armed conflict. Conferences, even women’s conferences, have a role to play.

Third, the authors reduce women’s movements in the United States to a single movement for Title IX. It is disturbing that a movement as rich and dynamic as women’s movements, a movement as important to the twentieth century, and a movement that no doubt played an important role in the authors’ own coming to consciousness about violence against women is disparagingly reduced to a single cause. While there is no question that Title IX, that element of the Civil Rights Act that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education in the United States, is of interest to feminists, it is also grossly incorrect to pejoratively reduce the movement to that. Domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and exclusion from education (all topics addressed by the authors for women outside the US) are part of our common vocabulary and present in public discussion forums only because of women’s movements in the United States. The authors might have chosen to see the important historical legacy of women’s movements rather than play into the tired stereotype that feminism is only about equality for some relatively privileged women to seemingly enlightened men. Further, claiming problems like those described in the book are only problems for women “over there” or in distant places implies two falsehoods: (1) it appears to claim that women in the Global North do not still die of domestic abuse (in spite of the fact that approximately one third of the women murdered in the US each year are victims of domestic violence²); and, (2) it “exoticizes” or “sensationalizes” problems at a distance thereby obscuring both the connection to similar problems in one’s own neighborhood and the causal relation between our state’s policies and the harm to women abroad.

The authors do not acknowledge the legacy of women’s movements in the United States, nor do they acknowledge the enduring need to fight violence and dehumanization of women in the United States. This leads to the fourth point I will make on this issue. The authors are not content simply not to see the possibilities of joining in solidarity with women’s movements; they explicitly though inconsistently exclude women’s movements. Consider their comment in searching for an analogous movement on which to model theirs:

[W]e're wary of taking the American women's movement as a model, because if the international effort is dubbed a "women's issue," then it will already have failed. The unfortunate reality is that women's issues are marginalized, and in any case, sex trafficking and mass rape should no more be seen as women's issues than slavery was a black issue or the Holocaust was a Jewish issue. These are all humanitarian concerns, transcending any one race, gender, or creed. (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 233–34)

True, the issues discussed in the book are humanitarian issues but they are also intensely gendered. The authors are correct that some care must be taken to attend to the potential cultural receptivity of efforts to challenge the subordination, abuse, or violence against women. Indeed, many women's movements around the globe have learned not to use the term "feminism" or to modify their efforts with the term "women" in certain contexts. On that point, I agree with the authors' caution. But it is also clear that they mean something more. Theirs is not just a caution about terminology in cultural contexts; theirs is an explicit attempt to disparage "women's movements" and in doing so appear to want to erase the gendered nature of the violations they discuss. The women are abused, oppressed, violated, and killed because they are women. That ought not to be obscured in the efforts to avoid terminology that would be unwelcome in certain cultural contexts. The authors would be well advised to distinguish the women's movement from what they describe as the dismissal of issues labeled "women's." The issues are our responsibility to address; they cannot be written off as someone else's (as women's) issues. They affect women as women. The women's movement has been *the* leading movement to argue for the humanity, and subsequent human rights, of all women. But there are many facets to that movement. Some facets do direct service to women in need, but some also work to chip away at the social structures that legitimate the subordination and docility of women and the dominance of men. Feminism and women's movements, in short, see the issues that affect women as connected, not discrete instances of inhumane violence, patterned attacks on the personhood of women.

Kristof and WuDunn do at times recognize the interconnections between issues, even if they resist calling these issues "women's issues" or the causes that address them feminist-motivated. Consider the following passage:

In much of the world, women die because they aren't thought to matter. There's a strong correlation between countries where women are marginalized and countries with high maternal mortality. Indeed, in the United States, maternal mortality remained very high throughout the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, even as incomes rose and access to doctors increased. As late as 1920, America had a maternal mortality rate equivalent to poor parts in Africa today. But then deaths from pregnancy began to plunge. One reason was antibiotics and blood transfusions, but another was women's suffrage. A society that gave women the right to vote also gave their lives more weight and directed more resources to women's health. When women could vote,

suddenly their lives became more important, and enfranchising women ended up providing a huge and unanticipated boost to women's health. (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 115-116)

Notice the unacknowledged role of American feminism and women's movements in this passage. Women's movements fought for suffrage (it didn't just happen) and, it should be added, women's movements fought for safer conditions in childbirth (even before suffrage). To so explicitly distance a cause aimed at addressing the abuses women face from women's movements (including it even within the four principles) is misguided. It is worth noting that the authors do not seem to have the same scorn for non-American feminists or feminism. In describing some advocacy networks in the regions they discuss, they even use the term "feminism."

Perhaps it might have been more productive for the authors to deepen the reprimand against the media. Various forms of entertainment media continue to profit from the portrayal of women as objects for abuse and domination. Meanwhile, mainstream news media has done little to respond to the human rights crisis Kristof and WuDunn chronicle. Turning the journalist's critical gaze on how women are portrayed, especially women from the Global South, might prove eye-opening. It is widely known that the televised soap operas had a tremendous positive impact on women's status in Brazil by lowering birth rates and encouraging empowerment, for instance. It is worth asking, then, how US media portrayals of veiled women as victims might be disempowering for women and fosters a biased or incorrect understanding of cultural issues facing women.

I have tried to walk a rather fine line in this roundtable discussion of the book. Kristof and WuDunn have thrown their considerable cultural influence behind some incredibly important issues. That ought to be appreciated and shared; I sincerely hope their book inspires a wide variety of people to become more aware and get involved. But I am also disappointed that they felt the need to belittle women's movements whose members have fought these issues (and so many more related issues) at home and abroad for so very long.

Notes

1. "Platform for Action," United Nations Fourth Conference on Women, Strategic objective E.1., <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/armed.htm#object1>.
2. "Violence Against Women in the United States: Statistics," National Organization for Women, <http://www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html>.

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