

***Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn**

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By Susan Ager

This is not bedtime reading.

No, this superb book will not put you to sleep, but it may haunt your dreams. It is grim and graphic in its detail about Third World brothels, sex trafficking, genital cutting, honor killings, indifference to women in childbirth and routine, workaday rape.

It is also personal. Real women, mostly under 20, with names you may be unable to pronounce, endure lives unimaginable to most of us.

That "Half the Sky" is so personal heightens its power and persuasiveness. It may change the way you view the world's voiceless women, in their oppression and their promise.

As Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" once catalyzed us to save our birds and better steward our Earth, "Half the Sky" stands to become a classic, spurring us to spare impoverished women these terrors, and elevate them to turn around the future of their nations.

"Women and girls cloistered in huts, uneducated, unemployed, and unable to contribute significantly to the world represent a vast seam of human gold that is never mined," write the authors, a married couple, who together won the Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of the Tiananmen Square uprising in China.

But that's only the economic argument to protect and nurture women. The other one is moral. "The brutality inflicted routinely on women and girls in much of the world [is] a malignancy that is slowly gaining recognition as one of the paramount human rights problems of this century," they write.

I cannot believe any is more compelling.

Meet Mahabouba Muhammad, sold in Ethiopia for \$10 at age 13 to a 60-year-old man who took her as his second wife, alternately raping and beating her. Pregnant, she ran away and went into labor, alone, for seven agonized days. The baby's death inside her left her incontinent in every way -- the result of a fistula, a common outcome in the world of brutal rapes (think sticks) or obstructed labor without medical intervention. The authors call these injuries "a cruelty of indifference."

Mahabouba's family and neighbors cursed her, and because of her stench, left her for the hyenas. She fought them off, then crawled to a nearby village where a missionary transported her to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital in Ethiopia, founded 34 years ago by an Australian couple. There, Mahabouba now works as a nurse's aide, wearing a colostomy bag.

Until now, I had never head the word "fistula." In the developed world, C-sections routinely save women and their babies. Elsewhere, "The equivalent of five jumbo jets' worth of women die in labor each day, but the issue is never covered," the authors write, and at least 10 times that many suffer fistulas or serious tearing.

But this is a book of both horror and hope. The authors introduce us to scores of "social entrepreneurs," instigating creative change large and small. Another Ethiopian fistula survivor -- illiterate -- helped a key surgeon at the fistula hospital for so long, and so well, that she performs surgery herself and trains visiting physicians.

Empowered, she has begun school. "Last time we visited," the authors write, "she had reached the third grade."

Cracking open the schoolhouse door is key. But how to get girls into school and keep them there? Several small measures make big differences:

Iodizing salt raises IQ, and keeps kids healthier and stronger. Teaching adolescent girls how to manage menstruation helps; many don't even own underpants. Funding new school uniforms, at about \$6 each, helps. Paying mothers a few dollars each month to keep their kids in school is working across Mexico.

The authors are not Pollyannas. They assert and reassert that progress remains "particularly challenging in that it involves tinkering with a culture, religion, and family relations of a society that we often don't fully understand." Local leadership of grass-roots programs, they say, is essential.

Their last chapter is titled "What You Can Do," and its final two pages list "Four Steps You Can Take in the Next Ten Minutes." The first is to go to this link and open an account to make loans as small as \$25 to Third World entrepreneurs you choose from their profiles.

I did it: 25 bucks to a woman who runs a small restaurant in Peru, a country I've visited. It was easy. You can do it. We must do it, and more, supporting women who hold up half the sky.

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