

"Film has always been globalized," he says. "The problem now is the tremendous growth of the multinational industry of Hollywood: the space for progressive film has gotten smaller, and the role for foreign-language films in the United States is shrinking." Peña believes that, compared with the innovative decades of the 1960s and 1970s, "Audiences today are much more conservative, much less willing to be challenged. That sense of going to the movies as an adventure is being lost. I remember how [the

1961 Alain Resnais film] *Last Year at Marienbad* challenged me, as a young man, to understand it. Today, younger audiences in general want to know what they're getting—that's why we have this spate of remakes of older films and television shows, and several versions of *Batman* and *Spiderman*."

Part of the mission of the NYFF is to counteract this trend toward dumbing down cinema. Peña likes making his job as an exhibit curator dovetail with a scholarly approach. A few years ago, for example,

he co-curated a series on German cinema from 1945 to 1960: "After the War, Before the Wall." This formerly overlooked era soon became the subject of several books. "Many people credit us with having made an intervention that changed how people think of that time before Fassbinder," Peña says. "There were some considerable talents, and some very popular cinema. I like my job, especially when I feel that I'm helping to write film history."

—CRAIG LAMBERT



Claudine, photographed in Gisenyi, Rwanda, in April 2006, was forced into prostitution after losing her parents in the 1994 genocide. She has joined with some 200 other women in an association fighting AIDS.

Kristof, a *New York Times* columnist, and WuDunn, a former *Times* foreign correspondent who now works independently on multimedia projects involving women's issues, make their first case effectively, drawing on their years of research (and it's clear they know the subject and its complexities very well). They tell how women are promised work, then sold into sexual slavery and imprisonment, while authorities turn a blind eye. They tell how these women are beaten, and raped, and drugged if they try to resist the men who have bought them; how many contract AIDS from forced sex work without protection, and die in their twenties; and how returning them to families and normal life is complicated by shame and addiction. They tell how in some cultures it's accepted practice for a man to rape the woman he wants to marry to force her to submit to him, and

how in others it's common for rape to be used as a weapon by criminals, or in family feuds—the perpetrators secure in the knowledge that shame will prevent the victim from reporting the attack to the authorities (and will often result in the victim's suicide). They describe how families and states fail to invest in education and healthcare for women, so that girls who could be an economic asset

Women in a Woeful World

Coming to terms with oppression

by ROHINI PANDE

If a woman earns more than her husband, it's difficult for him to discipline her.

Sharifa Bibi, Pakistan

Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide, by the Pulitzer Prize-winning husband-and-wife journalists Nicholas D. Kristof '82 and Sheryl WuDunn, M.B.A. '86, is more than just journalism. It's a tract that's unashamedly intended to outline a problem and convince its readers to take action to solve it.

The book—a series of essays and anecdotes that work together—forms an argument in two parts. The first part argues that the oppression of women in (mostly) developing countries is a devastating and under-recognized injustice that's the equivalent of slavery, and that demands a moral and political movement as focused and principled as the campaign against slavery to bring it to an end. The second discusses practical ways to create this movement and effect the change that's needed.

Nicholas D. Kristof '82 and Sheryl WuDunn, M.B.A. '86, *Half the Sky* (Knopf, \$27.95)

to their families and country instead end up controlled by and dependent on male relatives, undernourished and often dead at a young age from preventable diseases, or African women who suffer fistulas in childbirth (a painful, embarrassing condition, but curable by a simple operation) are abandoned to die on the edges of villages. They describe how some traditions that may be seen as oppressive, and are at least very dangerous to women's health, like genital cutting, can become so ingrained in a culture that women themselves support them.

The authors make their argument through a combination of statistics and some truly horrifying stories of individuals they've met who have been subjected to this kind of oppression—such as 14-year-old Mahabouba Muhammad, from Ethiopia. Mahabouba was abandoned by her parents, then sold into marriage by a neighbor. She found herself a virtual prisoner, raped by her “husband” and constantly beaten by his first wife. She became pregnant and ran away, but—as a pregnant and “married” woman—no relatives would help her and she was left to give birth alone. By the time help finally arrived, she had suffered obstructed labor (the baby died inside her) and internal injuries that left her doubly incontinent and unable to walk. Her relatives, fearing she was cursed, left her alone in a hut after removing the door, hoping hyenas would kill her. Only her indomitable will to live, and the fortuitous presence of a Western missionary in a nearby village, allowed her to survive.

THE SECOND PART of the authors' argument—practical ways to aid women—is sometimes on shakier ground. But this is mostly due to their honesty about the complexity of the problems faced by those who try to come from outside to fight the oppression of women in places where it's deeply ingrained: “This is our culture!” a Sudanese midwife declared angrily when we asked about cutting. “We all want it. Why is it America's business?”

They describe their own attempts to buy prostitutes out of slavery, and the social conditions that make restoring these women to a normal life so difficult. They tell of an attempt to help a woman dying in childbirth in an African hospital, and the institutional, social, and financial problems that foiled that effort. They discuss how their initial

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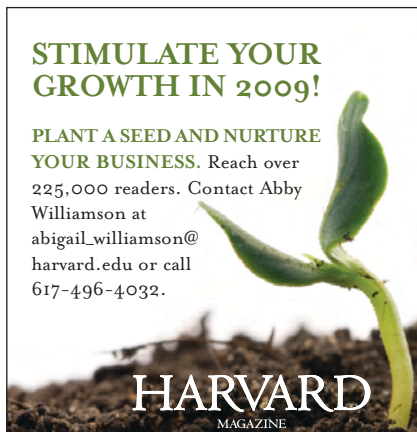
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support for legalization of prostitution was undercut by the more sordid reality they discovered behind the apparent success of just such a legal zone in India (in Kolkata), and examine how legalization of prostitution in the Netherlands compares as an anti-trafficking technique with the criminalization of sex-service purchases in Sweden. They point out how the campaign against female circumcision has been set back by the campaigners' use of terminology ("female genital mutilation") that turned the people they wanted to help against them. They point out over and over the inadequacies of the law—and of those who are supposed to enforce it—in the face of tradition and silence and public indifference.

This question of legality fits the anti-slavery analogy less well. Slavery was legal, and the abolitionists focused on arguing that it should become illegal. Once it was illegal, the trade stopped. Nowhere in the world are rape (outside of marriage), or enforced sexual slavery actually legal. The problem—and several of the stories the authors relate make this very clear—is the indifference or corruption of the authorities, and the silence of the victim, who would be subject to public humiliation were she to admit to her ordeal. Similarly, the denial of schooling or medical care often reflects families' ignorance of the earning potential of healthy, educated women.

Given their understandable suspicion of the effectiveness of corrupt and conservative authorities in fighting injustice, and their equally understandable discomfort with attempts by outsiders to impose change in places they don't fully understand, much of Kristof and WuDunn's proposed solution to the problem involves supporting individuals they call "social entrepreneurs."

They tell the story of Mukhtar Mai, in Pakistan, who was gang-raped and expected to commit suicide—but protested, instead. With the compensation she eventually received, she started her own school and social-welfare organizations and then started to speak out nationally and internationally against endemic violence against women in the country—often in a risky conflict with Pervez Musharraf's government, which didn't want its reputation sullied abroad. They write about Usha Narayane, who fought back against the gangsters who used rape to control her slum neighbourhood in India; Sunitha Krishnan, a literacy worker whose experi-

ence of rape at the hands of a group of men who objected to her organizing women in their village led her to found a group dedicated to opposing trafficking; and Edna Adan, who, against all odds, built a modern maternity hospital in Somaliland.

Kristof and WuDunn stress the importance of individuals speaking up and resisting—but it's here that their proposals (or, at least, their exhortations) seem questionable. Mukhtar Mai, Usha Narayane, and Sunitha Krishnan are clearly remarkable women, and deserve every support, but it is also true that they are very rare, brave, and driven individuals—and lucky, because their work clearly carries a very high risk. In a society where all the power

The answer is to bring what's hidden into the light—and to make it matter.

is elsewhere, resisting is very likely to end in defeat and quite possibly death. Even though the authors themselves, relatively affluent Westerners, clearly do not lead a safe life (there's a very casual reference to Kristof's involvement in a plane crash in the Congo), it still seems that it's no one's place to push others to take such risks. It's not enough to rely on a few brave individuals being prepared to fight for change.

The authors are more convincing when they make a case for improving education for women, and for other initiatives (often local and small-scale) that empower women financially. Women who are well-educated and who have an independent income naturally find a voice in the family and in democratic society. They gain the power to speak out and resist the injustice they see around them, or are suffering themselves.

As the authors note, this is also consonant with the growing evidence suggesting that empowering women as political leaders alters policy, often in ways that empower other women. In my research, I have found that voters, especially male, are willing to alter their beliefs about women's role in society when they see women leaders and, importantly, are then more likely to vote for women. I have also found that voter-information campaigns are effec-

tive in altering how slum dwellers in India vote—suggesting that the power of the ballot can potentially be harnessed to enable local action for women's rights.

Kristof and WuDunn conclude by exhorting readers to take action. In an earlier chapter, the authors mention that stories about individuals are much more effective in promoting action than statistics. They might have more confidence in the stories they tell. The exhortation feels unnecessary, and perhaps even patronizing. The case for change has already been made—and some of the actions they suggest to casual readers, such as signing up for e-mail updates from www.womensnews.org and www.worldpulse.com, or volunteering in the developing world, sometimes feel more like an attempt at moral improvement of Westerners than effective ways to bring about change elsewhere.

Over and over, the narratives make the same point: the problem here is the invisibility of the oppression, the silence and powerlessness of the humiliated and the uneducated, the indifference of the unknowing world. It becomes clear that the answer is to bring what is hidden into the light—whether it's oppression or neglect of individuals or groups, or the corruption of authorities—and to make it matter. That may be achieved by publicly supporting the brave individuals who speak out, and organize, and resist; or by working to give other women the economic status and education to be able to speak out without risk, to ensure for themselves that laws are enforced and women are treated with respect. It may also be achieved by using our positions as citizens of a rich and powerful country with relative freedom of speech to speak truths and make moral arguments that others don't have the influence to make or freedom to say. In this book, Kristof and WuDunn have done exactly that. ▢

Rohini Pande is Kamal professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. Her research focuses on the economic analysis of the politics and consequences of different forms of redistribution, principally in developing countries. She has examined the role of microfinance in enhancing social capital among women in India, as well as the role of gender quotas in politics in changing voter perceptions. She is now examining the role of information in enabling slum dwellers to hold politicians accountable (see www.hks.harvard.edu/about/faculty-staff-directory/rohini-pande).