

1-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Elizabeth Scannell, *Review: Exploring Half the Sky*, 33 CHILD. LEGAL RTS. J. 200 (2013).

Available at: <http://lawcommons.luc.edu/clrj/vol33/iss1/11>

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Review: Exploring *Half the Sky*

By Elizabeth Scannell

Shery WuDunn and Nicholas Kristof travel to five different countries to tell the stories of activists and survivors of gendered violence in *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (“*Half the Sky*”). Joining them are a variety of female celebrities, each paired with an activist organization working to empower girls across the globe. Each country brings new barriers and cultural norms, but the recurrent theme runs true: *violence against women and girls is a global crisis*.

Kristof begins the film with the story of how he and WuDunn began to explore global gender-based violence, contending that the two of them quickly found that “. . . the central human rights abuse of our age didn’t involve political repression, didn’t involve so many other things we focused on, but involved the chromosomes that people were born with.”

The film covers a variety of gender-based violence, including rape culture in Sierra Leone, sex trafficking in Cambodia, educational repression in Vietnam, genital mutilation in Somaliland, and economic empowerment in Kenya. In Sierra Leone, an activist characterized the 9,000 rape survivors her organization has seen over eight years as being composed of fifty-two percent children between twelve to seventeen years old, and twenty-six percent under twelve years-old. Somaly Mam, an activist in Cambodia, explains the systemic culture that allows sex slavery to persist, and even conducts a brothel raid with Kristoff.

Mam tells Kristoff and Meg Ryan about how she wants to help the girls she works with become children again, and also help them learn to laugh again. WuDunn and others such as Gloria Steinman call attention to the prevalence of trafficking within the United States, and how a multi-leveled response is needed to combat it on a domestic and international scale. Activists in Vietnam focus on educational repression, and argue that education is the key to empowerment—while Gabrielle Union rides the seventeen-mile distance with a girl who rides her bike to get to school every day.

Review of *Half the Sky*

It is extremely difficult to measure the quantitative prevalence of sex trafficking within the U.S., but some activists estimate that over 1.6 million children have been caught in the sex trafficking syndicate within the U.S. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement averages that 800,000 children and adults are trafficked into the U.S. for prostitution or forced labor per year. Further, the average age of entry into the trafficking syndicate in the U.S. is twelve to fourteen years old.

Melanne Verveer, the U.S. Ambassador for Global Women's Issues, recommends a "Heat at the Top and Heat at the Bottom" response to trafficking: government action, informed legislation, and consistent enforcement of those laws — as well as a societal and communal response to the devaluation of women and girls as human beings.

Half the Sky has drawn criticism for employing a "white savior" tone, particularly with its use of Western celebrities to serve as audience surrogates. Critics questioned why viewers needed celebrities to tell the stories of other women and girls, when those women and girls were able and willing to share their stories directly to the audience. They also argue that it is extremely problematic for Kristof and the various celebrities, all Western and privileged, to barge into a culture and use dramatics to trigger fleeting change for the sake of the cameras.

However, Kristof and other contributors are honest about that component early on in the miniseries, and Kristof directly addresses the problems with "outsiders" coming in and expecting an entire culture to change. He states very honestly that the famous women who accompany him will draw attention to the film and therefore the issues, and thus the ends justify the means. In contrast to what critics say, the fundamental message of *Half the Sky* is empowerment, and how progress for women and girls will benefit the greater society. These women and girls are the solution to many problems communities face. As Mam poignantly puts it, "This country cannot be a better country if women are not part of the solution."

Review of *Half the Sky*

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