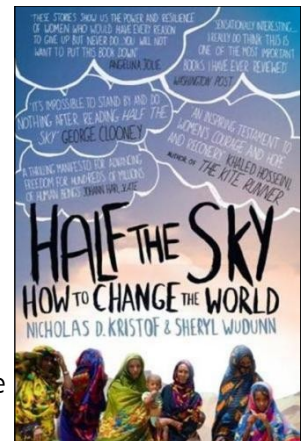


half the sky: how to change the world

Nicholas D Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn (Virago Press, 2010)

A book with a title like *How to Change the World* has to be good to deliver that promise! And it is. The book is already a New York Times best-seller, and was reprinted by Virago six times last year and twice so far this year. Written by two journalists, who certainly know how to tell a story and how to get their point across, it is a remarkable book, combining investigative journalism with a passion for change, and the ability to persuade the reader to do something.

From the very first page, with the story of Rath, a Cambodian teenager, we are drawn into the lives of women and girls who suffer oppression just because they are female. We are confronted with the statistics: 'more girls have been killed in the last fifty years, precisely because they were girls, than men were killed in all the battles of the twentieth century.' And the challenge is placed before us: 'In the nineteenth century, the central moral challenge was slavery. In the twentieth century, it was the battle against totalitarianism. We believe that in this century the paramount moral challenge will be the struggle for gender equality around the world.'



As someone who is passionate about gender equality, I am not short of things to be concerned about in the UK. But these pale into insignificance when put into the context of the widespread abuse and disadvantage experienced by women in many parts of the world.

The chapters cover such subjects as prostitution, rape, maternal mortality, family planning and 'honour' killing. I was particularly saddened to see that the chapter on 'honour' starts with a quotation from Deuteronomy 22:13-21 about stoning a girl to death if she is not a virgin. To what extent are we as Christians complicit in some of the violence done to women, because we have not spoken out against it and reinterpreted texts such as this?

One of the central theses of the book is that the plight of women worldwide is a tragedy—but also an opportunity. Helping women is a successful strategy for combating poverty. Where investment is made in girls' education, there is a 'double dividend'. The women and girls themselves are more able to escape poverty and exploitation, and they also help to life their children and communities.

So there are many stories of people trying to make a difference: men and women who have started awareness campaigns and taken action, financial solutions such as microcredit. There's Zach, a teenage boy who travels around the US speaking to school and church groups about human trafficking, and has written a book for teenagers on how to end slavery and change the world. There is Jordana, another teenager who started an organisation to raise money for girls' education abroad. I found it very helpful to hear about answers as well as problems.

Finally, a chapter 'What you can do'. More stories, some principles, and then 'Four steps you can take in the next ten minutes', a good way of helping readers to *do* something.

It is in the area of taking action that the book most shows its US roots, which slightly undermines its usefulness. Some organisations which exist on the web are international, but some of the organisations suggested for child sponsorship, news and advocacy are US based, and there may be equivalents in the UK which would be more appropriate. However, I suspect it's not difficult to find them, and it's the motivation to act which this book supplies. Beware! Reading it might change your life as well as helping you change the world.

Rosie Ward © CPAS 2011