

## Response to *Half the Sky* | Courtney Jensen

The title (“Half the Sky”) is clever. I give them points for lifting it from a “Chinese proverb”, which, in its non-amputated form reads “Women hold up half the sky.” But they don’t mention the author of that line until page 207. Until then, it allows the reader to assume it comes from an *ancient* Chinese proverb (of, say, Confucius-era)... which is important, but not so important that it demands immediate attention. Mostly it just oozes irony.

First, the book itself.

If you haven’t read it, it’s a bit like a two-part symphony. The first movement is a collection of short stories consisting of a couple dozen-ish snapshots of girls’ lives, each of whom was sold into sex slavery (or sexually abused in some comparable way). If you don’t get nauseated and shiver a little while reading them, you potentially have no soul.

Then, without much in the way of an intermission, the symphony enters its second movement, which is sort of a topical shotgun blast, where every chapter covers something completely different and practically unrelated (save for the underlying theme of female oppression). The topics they cover: fistulae and medical care, HIV/STDs, religion, education, poverty, etc.

I’m going to write my response in the reverse order: start with the shotgun spray and work my way backward toward the trafficking and sex slavery. Mostly because the second half of the book demands much less in the way of a reader response. So I can skip lightly over the dessert and rush my way to the dinner (which very much asks for a reaction).

The poverty and education stuff (starting at chapter ten) is largely uninteresting. Not because it isn’t dire. It is. It’s just obvious. To quote Oscar Wilde on the subject: “One has merely to read the ordinary English newspapers and the ordinary English novels of our day to become conscious of the fact that it is only the obvious that occurs, and only the obvious that is written about.”

Kristof and WuDunn (the authors) did make a couple points worth repeating though, mostly in their description of third world family values. For example: the amount of money parents spend on educating their children is a tenth the amount they spend on the combination of prostitutes, alcohol, and dietary excesses (candy, etc... this is described on pages 192 and 193). The division of essentials and frills is also worth its rerun. Prostitutes and beer: essentials. Condoms and mosquito nets: frills (pg 193).

Other than that, if I asked someone who hadn’t read the book to tell me what they thought it might say, all those sentences would appear in the text. So whatever you assume these chapters might be about, they are. They probably contain your exact thoughts (providing you think in complete sentences).

The bullet point summary (sufficient to capture the shotgun blast delivery):

- Contraception is hard to come by. That results in a lot of unwanted pregnancies.
- It’s hard to keep kids (especially girls) in school.
- Nobody gets enough food, so they’re all underweight and struggling with malnutrition.
- When women are allowed to work (often just with crops, and in doing so, they only farm crops deemed feminine... not much in the way of male overlap in terms of vegetation), the money

they bring home is spent on more responsible things. The men just spend their income on alcohol.

- Women seem to do well (compared to men) with infrastructure when given the chance in any sort of civil position. Probably because they're actually doing their job rather than accepting bribes to look the other way.
- Everyone is always sick with something. If it's not malaria, it's something just as debilitating. This impacts schools and the workforce and so on.

And so on and on and on. It's worthwhile to read, but much too obvious to reiterate.

The most interesting (and thus most discussable) chapter in the second half of the book was the one on obstetric fistulae (chapter six).

In case it's been a while since you took anatomy, fistulae are holes... and they're typically named after the tissues into which they bore themselves. An obstetric fistula is a hole that opens up in tissues no woman wants open: typically between the rectum and vagina (rectovaginal fistula). A hole here means feces will leak out of the sufferer's vagina uncontrollably... and with some amount of constancy. Confronting life with feces trickling down one's thighs is hardly an enhancer to one's social standing – and certainly does little to maximize well being privately.

The reason most Americans have never heard of this is because it doesn't exist here. No delivering woman ever gets her baby stuck halfway for a week. Things like competent doctors, c-sections, and unlimited suture have usurped the fistula's previous standing in the developed world. In the *developing* world though, it happens with discouraging commonness.

This is partly due to anatomy. Where good runners are born, babies tend to be *half* born. Go to the horn of Africa and you'll see a lot of narrow-pelvised women. This is a blessing if the woman is hoping to compete against Garrett in the marathon. But if she wants to have a dozen kids so that she might have several who reach adulthood, she's putting herself at a pretty serious risk of having particularly smelly thighs for the remainder of her life, which will probably be cut very short due to the consequent banishment from society.

In Ethiopia (where those who make successful exits from the birth canal tend to show promise as runners), Catherine and Reg Hamlin (a pair of married OBGYNs from Australia and New Zealand respectively) started a fistula hospital, which to this day remains the only major site in the world for fistula repair.

They founded the hospital in 1975 (in the city of Addis Ababa) and despite Reg's death in 1993, the hospital is still growing (and doing very, very well). There was a film made about this (which the book doesn't mention). *A Walk to Beautiful*. You can watch it for free online here:

<http://video.pbs.org/video/980049841/>

Catherine is still alive and very much involved... and still doing operations. The book refers to her as "athletic" (pg 95), but she's 88 years old. I question her athleticism. Unless relativized to other 88 year olds. As far as financial fitness, she's definitely at the top of her game though. The book and movie both leave out the observation that Catherine might have a bit *too* much money (evidenced by giant fleets of slightly-too-pompous cars). But if any organizations are going to be rewarded with more income than is

necessary to conduct operations, it warms my heart a little that Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital can be counted among them.

A friend of mine (Zoe) went to Ethiopia to do fistula surgeries (she's the one who described to me the fleets of cars). This was a couple years ago. She's seventeen now. When she was twelve, she and I went to Cameroon together. That's when both of us were first exposed to fistulae.

We were assisting her dad (an OBGYN) in third world surgery. To illustrate what I mean by "third world surgery", at one point we ran out of suture and started stitching people up with banjo strings. Mostly the d-string as they were the lightest gauge at our disposal.

About half of what we were doing was repairing fistulae. During this phase, I said something like "yikes" and I never went back (in defense of my stoicism, mostly for financial reasons; it's astonishingly expensive). Zoe has gone back every year since and has become fairly masterful in the surgery ward. "Masterful" is perhaps too modest a description. By the age of seventeen, she's invented two surgical techniques and has patents pending on both. And then in her free time, she made it into the Guinness Book of World Records in an effort to raise money to help women in Africa afford fistula operations (the foundation she started is here: <http://monzefistulatrust.com/>).

Each surgery costs about \$300 and (according to *A Walk to Beautiful*) is successful about 93% of the time (32:22 into the movie... I'm pretty sure Zoe's success rate is 100%).

Most women suffering from rectovaginal fistulae, prior to getting this surgery, are demoted to out-of-the-house hut-living due to the stench of the fixins' running down their legs (pg 97 of *Half the Sky*, at several points in *A Walk to Beautiful*, and conversations with Zoe). After the surgery, they return to society with a renewed fulfillment of whatever pleasures they had enjoyed prior to their injury. \$300 buys a whole new life. (This is me suggesting you should donate to Zoe's foundation... I did... but not enough to buy a whole new life... just a percentage of a life.)

And that concludes my response to the second half of the book. The scattershot part.

Though at the end of the second half, the authors do return to the subject of sexual crimes (topic of the first half of the book) with a nice little narrative about an arranged marriage, some spousal abuse, Saddam Hussein, a brief mention of Oprah Winfrey, and a happy ending. It's a very dense (though somehow still fluffy) four-page narrative beginning on page 216. And it was the perfect transition into their call for action (how they conclude their book), save for the neglect to mention a probable source of nutrition feeding Saddam's ruthlessness (i.e. Islam).

Rallying "holy war" speeches and Quaranic invocations aside, the guy had every Islamic passage ever put to paper – all 114 chapters – written out in his own blood.

*Half the Sky* – I think disappointingly – skips over this little fact.

The Qur'an is not a short book. It took Muhammad twenty-three years to write it (supposedly). Thirteen and a half centuries later, it took two years (and seven gallons of Saddam-blood) to recreate it. That's serious devotion. It seems very clear Saddam wasn't just some berserk, secular beast, behaving in the way he was for god only knows why. He was functioning on divine mandates... and his behavior

was – at least in part – a product of that (which I could evidence with reams of quotations, but don't see a need; I think gallons of blood probably suffices).

Anyway, I'll return to the subject of the "call to action" that follows this story at the end of my response. It would seem unusually out of place to do so right here.

For now, let me rewind to the beginning. The first half of the book. As I may have indicated earlier, this is the heavier of the two halves. In case I didn't mention that, this: it's the heavier of the two halves.

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (the Pulitzer'd authors of this book) have been documenting their observations of female oppression and investigating sex trafficking and its victims since 1989, when the then-newlyweds were sent to China by the *New York Times* to investigate the Tiananmen Square protest.

(Personal note: this is a very short time after Nicholas left the journalism job where he and Zoe's dad, Fred, were writers together. When he left, he gave Fred his air purifier. Fred gave it to someone else when he eventually left. It's probably still there.)

Since then (i.e., since Nicholas and Sheryl went to China), they've continued to travel and take notice... and the first half of *Half the Sky* is a collection of 2ish-page life stories of the victims they noticed along the way.

I'm not going to talk about all the victims. That's what the book does. And I'm not inclined to rewrite the entire book. But the story on which the book begins is a Cambodian girl named Srey Rath, who, at the age of fifteen, wound up forced into a brothel in Thailand and enslaved as a prostitute (property of the brothel owner).

When she resists (and right she should), she's beaten and drugged into compliance (under threat of ongoing abuse and ultimately murder... resistance can be quite lethal for a prostitute).

Compliance meant that Srey worked (i.e., had sex involuntarily) for roughly seventy hours a week (ten hours per day, all seven days is a typical workweek for girls like her).

When she clocks off for the day, she's shepherded into a tiny, inescapable room with a dozen other sex slaves. That's the sleeping quarters. And my use of the word "shepherded" was very purposeful (with deliberate Isaiah allusion). In a somewhat famous Christopher Hitchens passage, he notes that shepherds don't tend their flock because they love them (save for the occasional lonely chap who fornicates with them). They keep their sheep alive only so they may be fleeced at the opportune times (and maybe for whatever milk can be squeezed out of them). Then they're unceremoniously killed. The prostitutes have a very similar fate (which the authors describe in very different words... and a discouraging lack of analogy).

Most of these stories (including Srey Rath's) bear an incredible likeness to Upton Sinclair's Marija character in *The Jungle*, which came out 103 years before *Half the Sky*. (*The Jungle* was about a lot more than meat packing... unless the expression "meat packing" can be used as a particularly provocative innuendo... one that doesn't quite curb the vulgarity of the issue).

Being as *Half the Sky* is nonfiction, it makes me wonder which of the following is true:

1) Real life is a complete plagiarism of old fiction; brothel owners are *that* unoriginal.

Or:

2) If Sinclair was just *that* accurate in his description... and over the last century, sex slavery hasn't changed much. It's not only *as* hideous as it used to be, but the recipe of its hideousness is remarkably similar.

There's a variety of ways in which the girls are acquired and kept. The way in which Marija (*The Jungle*) was enslaved is apparently still common. The girl is forced onto drugs and the subsequent chemical addiction results in an ongoing need for a fix. And the supplier is... wait for it... the brothel owner! So the only way the girl can satiate her chemical dependency is through "work." But that "work" does not have her "breaking even" in a financial sense. And the longer she stays, the more her debt accrues (regarded as "debt bondage").

This living situation, as it is described in *The Jungle*, is pretty much spot on for all the real life accounts told in *Half the Sky*.

The trafficking component seems to be the new addition. And it's not *actually* new. One could argue the transatlantic slave trade is where trafficking really found its bearings, hauling its victims from west and central Africa clear to the eastern seaboard of the United States. That began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (well before *The Jungle* and *Half the Sky* found passage to their respective printing presses, which I will refer to collectively as "Half the Jungle"). And slavery was already old hat by the time people of African descent were forced into its trade. A seriously ancient hat.

My point is this: Slavery for both labor and sex is amazingly old. And the trafficking component appears to have reinvented itself in an especially ugly way with sex slavery. The purpose of the trafficking is to get the girls far enough away from home that, even if they could escape, what would they do? They barely know where they are, they don't know a single person, and even if they met some potential savior, they don't speak the same language. One might suppose a police station is a good start for runaways. We can be pretty sure the girls had this thought prior to the readers. Those who attempted to act on it (and were actually able to find a police station) were in for a surprise (of the most savage sort).

If the policemen don't just rape the girl too (page 50 – India – with a repeat performance on page 84 – Pakistan), there's a good chance they'll turn a profit by selling her to a trafficker who then installs her in a different brothel (page xiii).

Should the authorities to whom the runaways issue their pleas be Congolese militia, that's where the real misogyny and barbarism are returned. These men finish their copulative duties with a signature move that makes *Mortal Kombat's* "finish him!" finales appear humane: they fire their guns into the woman's vagina. Their victims aren't all prostitute runaways either. Any female will do, beginning at age three and working up from there (pg 84). Or if they get bored of their firearms (or perhaps there's a shortage of arms dealers in the area), they might substitute the trigger finger with a stick-trick; jugging it all up in the bio-avenues until the tissues are sufficiently punctured (i.e., fistula), giving the urine and feces an escape route (pg 85).

There are three types of law enforcement officers who may respond to the pleas of sex slaves:

- 1) The good police officers (who make discouragingly few appearances; both in this book and in real life).
- 2) The bad police officers (who appear with horrifying frequency as a result of brothel owners bribing their loyalty with free access to their girls).
- 3) The police chief of Tehran (who unfortunately does represent an entire demographic).

By 2008, the police chief of Tehran, Gen. Reza Zarei, had made a name for himself through his unusually firm opposition to prostitution in practically every one of his policies..... until April of that year when a squad of his officers raided the brothel he was secretly attending and he was caught naked with six naked prostitutes. Seven birthday suits all hard at work (page xxvii).

This little episode captures a lot of levels of naughtiness.

If we were to catalog that naughtiness chronologically, we'd start with Genesis, which says that those birthday suits are evil on their own... regardless of the circumstance in which they display themselves. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree that gives them knowledge of good and evil, they became aware that their genitals were exposed to each other. That seems to be the full extent of the knowledge gained by the fruit. Nakedness alone is apparently all that is evil in this world.

But Zarei takes that nakedness (i.e., evilness) to the max. And while I find his ascent to maximalhood to be a delicious addition to the tome of human embarrassment, the authors failed to cite the original (and certainly the most famous) passage describing this regrettable component of the human condition. And this was probably the only opportunity they had to play the Shakespeare card in the entire book. (The Shakespeare card being a particularly mighty one.)

In Chapter 4, scene 6 of *King Lear*, Shakespeare offers a sort of Freudian projection in his description of the policeman punishing the prostitute, which completely captures the Tehran episode. According to Shakespeare, the outburst of his lash is less about being a stickler with the law than it is about a repression of his own desire to use her services.

Four centuries later, the human condition hasn't changed. What Shakespeare wrote in the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is an exact description of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Iranian police chief. This is saddening on a lot of levels. Not least among them: Our species is a gigantic cliché. One cannot maintain a 400 year subscription to a stereotype and escape mockery.

But it also illustrates how our species is very clearly a bad one. And, given the sluggishness of change over the last several centuries, I don't foresee us becoming any less awful in the near future. Four hundred wretched years is not likely to turn back on itself over a single publication (*Half the Sky*). But it's a good step; another stone cobbled into the path.

And at least in Srey Rath's case, it did have a happy ending. She escaped, married a guy who may or not beat her (it didn't get into that), and they had a son together.

The rest of the book's stories end in varying amounts of horror, with the primary aim of offering details designed to upset the reader's stomach (kidnapped girls forced to eat dog poop between rapes, etc).

Though it does make some rather unlettered suggestions as to why these horrors are occurring. On page 135, the authors present a sort of unsophisticated understanding of the evolutionary influence over parental roles. It goes something like this: Men want to spread the seed; women want to invest in its yield. Therefore men blast sperm into any fertile hole they can find while women try to isolate those men into exclusive protection roles.

Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá make a pretty strong case in opposition to this in their 2010 book *Sex at Dawn*. The hard-to-disbelieve position at which they arrive is that it's a matter of culture more than biology. Men and women in pre-Judaic nomadic tribes – effectively everyone in pre-modern human history – were equals. And inequality wasn't cultured into our *perception* of biological roles until the advent of farming. And even then, not ubiquitously.

So the appropriate question to ask is where all of this marginalizing of women originates? If not strict biology, there's some other reservoir from which it is drawn. Maybe people *are* just born wretches, but it would be hard to argue that all men are born with an innate desire to abuse and own women when the vast sweep of human history strongly suggests otherwise. It seems more likely that the most gruesome among these behaviors has to actually be taught and built into "cultures."

I put "cultures" in quotation marks because using it in that way is a perversion of its real meaning. It's mostly a matter of syllabic efficiency. It's one syllable too long. And without the circumcising of its tail, it offers euphemism to the real thing.

It wasn't until the advent of agriculture when we settled down and established a bunch of cults that rendered women property. And put the laws of those cults down as "The Word of God."

Now I ask you, is it really the creator of the universe that detests women, or is it maybe just a few heinous cult leaders that decided their own wellbeing would be enhanced if they had access to numerous pre-pubescent sex slaves for the remainder of their lives? This doesn't feel like something the creator of the universe would prioritize into the top of his agenda, asking that his prophets dedicate suspiciously large chunks of prose to its authorization. It seems as trivial as it does gross.

If I were designing a universe, and all the people I had created were dying left and right of things like cardiovascular disease, I'd get to work on inventing a better vascular system. Instead: "Na, who cares... As long as little girls are raped by old men for eternity, that's what's most important. The rest of the stuff – you know, cancer and all of that – I just can't be bothered. I've already mandated sex slavery; I feel my job here is done. It's high time I sit back and watch my people suffer." Some millennia later: "Uh oh, not enough suffering being endured in Pakistan. I had better assign a hardship."

I have a hunch this is where the misogyny comes from – gender roles being legislated from Bronze and Iron Age theological doctrine – more so than from biology. Not exclusively. It'd be a bit much for me to say it's the *only* reason. I bet biology plays a role too, but in non-specific marginalization rather than strict misogyny. It's the in-group versus out-group argument. Works by Dawkins and Hartung capture in-group charity and out-group ruthlessness very well (and with convincing evidence). And if you read any holy scripture (as I have; every single one of them from every major religion), all the hegemony is mandated... and women *really* don't fare well.

So I obviously differ in my opinions (from the authors) on where misogyny is born (old, gross cult leaders) and how it's kept alive (what those cult leaders wrote thousands of years ago operating as the iron lung of archaic oppression).

I could be wrong. But so could they. My hunch is the truth is somewhere in the middle... though I would be baffled if it turned out my middle wasn't much burlier than their middle... which is why my middle's obesity carries a slight tone of pomposity.

Anyway, back to *Half the Sky* and its calculated promotion of nausea.

Another detail for the tummy-ache: A fair amount of the kidnapped girls) are sold into the brothels before ever having a period.

I thought this would have been a perfect segue into governmental policies on sexual relations and the age of consent. Kristof and WuDunn didn't make that transition. But I'm still going to. This:

The age of consent obviously varies between countries (as it does between states in the U.S.). In a lot of the more questionable countries, the age of consent is twelve, but if those questionable countries are Islamic, then there's no such thing as extramarital consent. Marriage is the *only* form consent may take and it *must* precede sex. This means the legal age of consent is technically six, since that's the age at which you can marry (or rather, *be* married, since the verb on its own implies choice and I wouldn't have known quite what I was doing as a six year old).

And in most Muslim areas of the world homosexuality is punishable by death. It's very, very illegal. Though in a couple more "progressive" locations (n=7, and progressive is in quotations because it supposes places like Myanmar can be considered progressive), *women* (and only women) are permitted to have homosexual relations, but the age of lesbian consent is 16. The age here somehow seems arbitrary. And the purpose of women-only homosexuality seems to be exclusively for porn.

Anyway, back to the book: All the little kidnapped girls who are about to experience their periods for the first time protest their new role. Obviously. When they're placed in a room with a gross, middle-aged man, one would hope they resist. But when they do, they're beaten and drugged and raped until they submit. And if they cry about it, they're beaten and raped until they stop crying. And if they appear listless and defeated after all of this (how could they not be?), they're beaten and raped until their thespian prowess has them beaming radiantly at potential customers, convincing these men that every girl here is thrilled to be raped every waking hour of her life.

And this gives an on-the-surface appearance that prostitution isn't that bad; that it's a career choice for the opportunistic. Or, another strangely popular opinion: When it comes to trafficking, not only is it 'not that bad' for the girls, but it allows a sense of harmony for the rest of society, so we can look passed the victims and chalk it up to matters of the greater good (pages 23-24).

They offered the right quotation to illustrate the absurdity in this position (page 23). "Although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself." —Abraham Lincoln



The obvious implication here is that no pimp or trafficking agent has ever authenticated his “greater good” position by stripping himself down and surrendering the remainder of his life to a tyrannical sadist. And there’s something uniquely ugly about accepting all the sacrifices and giving of others quite happily, but when it’s your turn to give, you retire into a fit of excuses (or are just nowhere to be seen). In terms of the larger social picture, this is not a win-win. There’s nothing symbiotic about the relationship. And what happens when the women are “gendercided” to the brink of extinction in these cultures? Who will be exploited and parasitized then? In the words of Mark Twain (page xi) “What would men be without women? Scarce sir, mighty scarce.”

On the subject of scarcity (i.e., the thinning population of girls), the frequency of sex-selective abortions in China and India led to legislation that prohibits patients from being told the gender of the child while in utero. Though, perhaps to greater misfortune, this didn’t result in more adult females entering the Chinese and Indian populations. It just resulted in SIDS claiming more girls than boys (page xvii). I somehow doubt this is due to toddler hardness.

The book suggests in the last 50 years, more girls have been killed for being girls than all the men lost in all the wars fought in the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (page xvii). Though it seems prudent to note that this estimation is packaged with several assumptions, and once a girl is converted into a sex slave, it hardly seems profitable to kill her. AIDS and Jack the Ripper (and his successor, Jack the Stripper) are probably bigger threats to their survival than brothel owners. The shepherd-and-the sheep analogy explains why: Nobody wants to eat a prostitute. Their utility is lost when they’re killed. You can milk the cow, collect the eggs, whatever. And when you’re done, you can butcher them and have a freezer full of meat. But if you have no intention on eating that meat, there’s no point in butchering it. It’s just a waste of time (and cows).

So the girls live on (until they’re prematurely killed by AIDS). And the reason people continue to get away with all the enslavement and mistreatment is because the enslaved and mistreated are perceived as chattel. They’re no less of a farm animal than the milk cow. I’ll talk more about this later (if I remember to do so). For now, estimating the incidence and prevalence of girls who have been trafficked into sex slavery is difficult. In part, it’s difficult to accept the findings of researchers because they abuse their data into submission as if it were a prepubescent village girl needing to be broken in... and eventually the datum, not unlike the girl, delivers the product expected of it (even I find that joke in bad taste).

For the most part, the authors – being journalists – leave out statistics where scientists would see them fit, citing data that show the story tends to be much more galvanizing than the statistic (pg 99). Though among the stats they do include, they cite *The Lancet* (page 9): “1 million children are forced into prostitution every year.” Other sources estimate much higher, but *The Lancet’s* more conservative finding is probably more accurate, as the higher numbers tend to be intentionally high to shock people into action.

Then again, the article they’re referencing comes from 2002, and according to UN estimations and reports from Cornell University (both of which I made available on the ElfCheese.com homepage), the incidence continued to rise after 2002. But even at this more conservative incidence, the number of girls being trafficked as sex slaves outnumbers the number of Africans being shipped when the transatlantic slave trade was at its peak (page 11).

A few different approaches have been taken to combat this:

- 1) Total crackdown, where practically everything is outlawed and police raids result in a mess of incarcerations. This sort of works.
- 2) Semi-crackdown, as attempted by Sweden in 1999, in which everyone is guilty but the prostitute (labeling her the victim; page 31). This seems to work pretty well.
- 3) Legalize and regulate, with the girls themselves joining sex worker unions and the law keeping an unblinking eye on the practice. This doesn't appear to work, which I'll explain why in a non-numbered paragraph, beginning now:

This doesn't appear to work. One would think regulation of brothels would do the trick, but it just gets too tricky. In part, the trickiness comes from businesses just adding a legal arm to their illegal operation. And that new appendage becomes the signpost. But underneath, it's still all sleazy and gnarly. For example, the sex worker unions are supposed to promote condom use. And they do, but if the customer pays a few more dollars, he gets the privilege of not using one. And do the prostitutes have any say in this? Of course not. And do they see any of the extra pay? Of course not. It just ups the earnings of the brothel owners (page 29).

So in theory, and a very superficial layer of that theory, regulation results in the prostitutes being treated a bit better. But they aren't emancipated from the role. So ultimately it just gives society the means to say "it's not that bad."

Much like the absence of Shakespeare's passage earlier was a little bit disappointing (as a matter of proper allusion), this would have been the perfect spot to incant a few words from Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*:

"The worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realized by those who suffered from it."

In other words, it's not whether it's absurd or not; whether it's cruel or not. It only matters if people behave absurdly or cruelly enough to elicit change. And I think that's the point the authors were hoping to make (but didn't quite... though the implication was certainly there... good effort, guys!).

As the short stories go on, issuing varying levels of nausea over the "horror of the system", you find yourself actually cheering on a murder at one point.

A group of tormented girls band together to murder their tormentor: a slum king who is fifteen years into his abusive reign. And your cheering is rewarded with a spectacularly gruesome kill where a few knives are passed between hundreds of women, each of whom has herself a therapeutic stab (page 52). And then, as the story winds down, you realize you just felt warmhearted about murder, which leads to the inevitable epiphany that this whole thing is hideous. Even its karmic resolve.

Another oddly cheer-able moment (albeit less unwholesome than murder) is the invention of the "rapex", a spiked tampon (page 61). Sonette Ehlers (an upper class, white doctor in South Africa) produced this after hearing a rape victim tell her about "if I only had teeth down there."

"Teeth down there" (and the product that the thought inspired) are derivative of old Native American (and seemingly Japanese and a lot of other folklore) tales about "vagina dentate" (literally meaning toothed vagina). The book doesn't talk about this, but it's famous enough to warrant mention. It's a

bunch of vaginal teeth to destroy the entering penis, and thus ward off uninvited sex. So I have a hard time assigning Sonette total inventive credit, but I can applaud.

Plus I could say the same thing about Darwin and evolution (or rather “descent with adaptation”, for those who have read Darwin’s works). Tons of people wrote about evolution years before he did. He just did so with more charm – and a bit more vinegar – than his predecessors. And I think that’s the compliment that I can pay to Sonette. Except in this case, charm can be swapped with utility (same amount of vinegar). And my applause for that utility.

Anyway, the book does eventually end (after the Saddam Hussein story). The great dismount off the beams of prose is their “what you can do to help” section, which is effectively a call to arms; how you can lend your time, purses and wallets to the fight. This is good. And I agree with all points made (though my conclusions do differ wildly... as I’ve already explained... probably offensively).

In their last two chapters (fourteen and fifteen, starting on page 233), they urge readers to avoid looking at this as a “women’s issue” and instead as a “humanitarian concern” (page 234). And to think of women’s rights globally. Focusing on the volleyball team’s equal representation under title IX seems a bit petty in comparison to the millions of genitals being cut out of females all over the world (page 244). And to realize that whatever empowers women in a culture emancipates that culture from poverty. If 50% of the workforce is confined at home, condemned to contribute nothing, that’s not going to be a region of the world associated with impressive GDP.

And then the authors provide a list of resources where you can become involved (to which I very proudly add Zoe’s foundation... eight pages north of this sentence).

The quieter “call to arms” the authors make – it’s more of an undertone throughout the book – is that people of average intelligence and average morality shouldn’t be too afraid or lazy to speak up.

One example they give is in China. It used to be commonplace that if a girl came slipping out of the womb, she was either killed, or worse: reared in a Chinese family. Her entire youth was spent responding to a name like “number 2” and learning to walk upright on feet that were bound into little pegs, as if the resultant lifelong hobble-gait upon mangled half-feet was somehow desirable and sexy (page 207).

Then people with average intelligence and ethical constitutions spoke up and the result of that was progress. Girls might not be the cherished gender quite yet, but at least they have feet.

Where I differ from the authors, is that I think it reprehensible to not apply the same reproof to the religious doctrines that engender the same (technically far worse) oppressive outcomes.

Here, for whatever reason, nobody is allowed to speak up. There’s a tacit law of respect one must show. Because all of these disgusting mistreatments of children and women have been mandated by scripture, we’re not allowed to challenge anything it says. Who am I to oppose the teachings of the holy sadists as they assign and command sexual torture from the sky?

I’m still a wee bit unsure if this is a position I should be sentencing to paper (technically to PDF) at risk of deeply offending anyone who has actually managed to read this far (presumably nobody). But we’re all grad students (and a tenured professor). And we center ourselves on scientific reasoning and inquiry.

So naturally each of us is (or at least should be) unconditionally committed to formal logic and evidential reasoning. We should all be filled to the brim with objectivity (lest we be terrible scientists). We're not a bunch of children at recess who need to be shielded from every opinion that might run contrary to our own. And I think, for one to be considered a proper adult – not even a scientist, just a proper adult – there's a compulsory openness one must have to different opinions and exposures. And while I know plenty of adults who can be likened to children at play in an unusually lengthy recess, I can't think of any who could possibly be reading this. Academia doesn't usually invite or attract that crowd. So that's my induction of permissibility to offer my response to the book (and my subsequent call to arms), which is to suggest that policy is poisoned by antiquated theological doctrine. It's a recipe for inherited oppressions to be passed down generation after generation. And this is what paralyzes our change and growth, keeping women in bondage all over the world.

I would go into more detail with that here, but A) my positions would probably become uncomfortably hostile (so those thoughts are better harbored in private), and B) this response would quickly become ten times its current length (which is already way too long... although I'm not *too* concerned with how I might be wasting your time, I really do need to budget for the daunting amount of data entry I have left to do tonight).

So I don't feel like the unabridged version needs to be shared, but I do think the subject of the book calls for this discussion exactly... and that the book falls short on providing it. I assume this shortfall is very intentional, being an effort made by the authors to avoid cutting off the majority of their audience (i.e., readers without a knack for objectivity and formal logic).

Though I don't know how many Muslims are going to be reading *Half the Sky*. I would assume none. And Christians tend not to be dangerous due to things like the Vatican; a central authority that, among other things, adapts teachings and practices so that they're relevant to (and compatible with) contemporary ethics (despite what the scripture actually says).

Islam doesn't have anything like a Vatican. There's no central authority. So the pitiless, misogynistic, 7<sup>th</sup> century teachings are obeyed as if applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence, girls are marginalized, raped and murdered, and civil society compromised. (It would be hard for any thinking person to suspect Islam is "okay" if they actually read the book.) At least Jesus said hookers go to heaven (Matthew 21:31... alongside a heap of other very moral teachings which do deserve respect, but this isn't a forum for me to comment on that).

And if I have to compliment Islamic theocracies in order to feel I haven't been inequitable in my reproach, those nations really are a wonderful place for scientists to study skin grafts, as girls routinely have their faces melted off with battery acid as a punishment for things like learning to read.

(I do wish the book would have said this stuff so I could just cite page numbers rather than paint *myself* as the fanatical one. But if I have to be an extremist in something, at least global ethics is a less reprehensible pursuit of extremism. And don't feel you have to agree with anything I said... though I'm not sure what your argument against any of it would be. But if you have one, I would love it to come up in the commentary. Or any other response about any other subject related to *Half the Sky*. Just post them in the comment box and start the dialog.)

-Courtney