

Look Who's Telling Us to End the Oppression of Women: PBS's "*Half the Sky*"

by John Spritzler

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Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) T.V. aired [*Half the Sky*](#) October 1 and 2. It was a T.V. version of a book by the same title written by the husband and wife team of NYT columnist Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn. The show is about the ways women around the world are mistreated, exploited, oppressed and discriminated against. It reveals how women are aborted as babies for being female, die for lack of health care equal to what men receive, are denied an education and often forced to be prostitutes, and subjected to female genital mutilation that not only denies them sexual pleasure but also increases their risk of

death in childbirth. It celebrates women who are working to change this, especially women who have escaped from horrible abuse such as being imprisoned by sex-traffickers, and who are helping others to do the same; and it emphasizes that women are the solution, not the problem.

The show interweaves talking heads with film footage of Kristof and various celebrities visiting many parts of the world and being received as guests by good people (mostly but not all women) who are working to expose and end the abuse of women and to enable women to enjoy equality with men in all walks of life.

At first, my reaction to this show was, "What's not to like?" It was heartwarming and uplifting and inspiring. It made me want to take out my checkbook and write a check to help these "*Half the Sky*" people.

Who Sponsored *Half the Sky*, and Why?

But then I wondered, why was one of the main talking heads Hilary Clinton? Why was one of

the sponsors of the show Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women? Other sponsors included the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Nike Foundation and the Coca-Cola Foundation. Are Hillary Clinton and these sponsors really friends of the approximately three billion women and girls who hold up half the sky?

Is Hillary Clinton a compassionate friend of oppressed women, as she seems to be on the PBS airwaves? Consider the following.

In the winter of 2008-9 Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against the civilian population of Gaza. It was a massacre of civilians who had no place to run or hide. At least 1,116 Palestinians (352 of them children, probably about half girls) were killed (versus 13 Israeli deaths, 4 of which were from "friendly fire.") South African Justice Richard Goldstone investigated and called it a crime against humanity. Here's [a video](#) explaining why. But perhaps [THIS VIDEO](#)

conveys the reality better; it is a live Israeli TV broadcast during which the announcer is on the telephone with Palestinian doctor Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish, who worked for years at an Israeli hospital, and who, at the time, is in his home in Gaza and totally distraught because Israeli bombs have just fallen on his home and killed his three daughters.

Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State at the time. Did she condemn this murder of innocent women and girls (not to mention men and boys)? On the contrary. Not a peep! But the Secretary of State is not a shy woman. When the perpetrator of a massacre was (supposedly) Syria (and the number killed was far fewer than in the Gaza massacre, this time only 60 adults and 32 children), Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton condemned the attack “[in the strongest possible terms](#),” demanding that “those who perpetrated this atrocity must be identified and held to account.”

Are Palestinian women and girls less important than Syrian ones? What can one say about a person who ignores the murder of women when committed by an ally and only condemns such murder when it serves the interests of the rich and powerful who control the American government? Can such a person be considered a compassionate friend of oppressed women? Of course not! But why, then, is Hillary Clinton presented this way by PBS in Half the Sky?

Why would PBS seek out Hillary Clinton to be the face of compassionate concern for the women of the world when she loyally defends a man--Bill Clinton--who deliberately murdered many thousands of women and girls with his sanctions against Iraq? Denis Halliday, the former UN humanitarian coordinator in Baghdad resigned in 1998 to protest against the sanctions, [citing](#), "4,000 to 5,000 children dying unnecessarily every month due to the impact of sanctions because of the breakdown of water and sanitation, inadequate diet and the bad internal

health situation". These deaths, due especially to sanctions on water treatment parts that led to diseases such as cholera and measles were [known and intended](#) consequences of the sanctions. Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, famously [told Leslie Stahl](#) that she thought the killing of 500,000 Iraqi children by the U.S. imposed [sanctions](#) "was worth it."

The reason PBS portrays Hillary Clinton as a champion of three billion women and girls has a lot to do with the reason Half the Sky's sponsors include [Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women](#). Goldman Sachs is well-known for being one of the most criminally sociopathic establishments on the face of the earth, specializing in impoverishing ordinary people--including of course women--in order to enrich a few people beyond the dreams of most.

It isn't just that Goldman Sachs deliberately lies to its investor clients to rob them, as Greg Smith, Goldman Sachs's executive director and head of the firm's United States equity derivatives

business in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, describes in a [NYT Op-Ed](#) on the occasion of his resignation in disgust from the firm. It's much worse than that. Goldman Sachs [deliberately created the housing bubble](#), the bursting of which enabled their former CEO, Hank Paulson, as Treasury Secretary, to give the company a \$300 billion taxpayer bailout, while 3.5 million Americans became homeless (many because their homes were foreclosed, thanks to Goldman Sachs) and more millions unemployed, many of whom are, of course, women and girls. Goldman Sachs, out of pure greed, impoverishes people, including women and girls. One specific example of how Goldman Sachs impoverishes women (and men) is spelled out in [this video](#) about one of their most famous businesses, Burger King, whose underpaid workers are mostly single moms whom Goldman Sachs treats like dirt in order to make big bucks for Goldman Sachs.

What does this poverty mean, exactly?

The American Psychological Association [says a lot about the effects of poverty](#). Here are just few of them:

"Poorer children and teens are also at greater risk for several negative outcomes such as poor academic achievement, school dropout, abuse and neglect, behavioral and socioemotional problems, physical health problems, and developmental delays.

"Poverty has a particularly adverse effect on the academic outcomes of children, especially during early childhood. Chronic stress associated with living in poverty has been shown to adversely affect children's concentration and memory which may impact their ability to learn. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2008, the dropout rate of students living in low-income families was about four and one-half times greater than the rate of children from higher-income families (8.7 percent versus 2.0 percent). "

PBS's *Half the Sky* purports to be all about ending these effects of poverty that affect women even more than men. But why are the show's sponsors the very people who are causing the impoverishment of women? To understand this, let's look at what Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women says its purpose is. As its [webpage states](#):

"10,000 Women is a five-year, \$100 million global initiative to help grow local economies and bring about greater shared prosperity by providing 10,000 underserved women entrepreneurs with a business and management education, access to mentors and networks and links to capital."

It's about recruiting women to become entrepreneurs, in other words capitalists, in the same mold, if not on the same scale, as Goldman Sachs capitalists. It is about persuading women to adopt the capitalist outlook on life: the way to make the world better is not by challenging its class inequality but rather by individually "climbing the ladder" to rise higher in a society

that remains one of class inequality. The emphasis is on women getting an education so they can get a professional or business job in the capitalist world of Goldman Sachs's dreams. The theory is that economic development is hindered if women are not able to be part of the capitalist society on an equal footing with men.

From the book, *Half the Sky*, we read:

"So let us be clear about this up front: We hope to recruit you to join an incipient movement to emancipate women and fight global poverty by unlocking women's power as economic catalysts. That is the process under way—not a drama of victimization but of empowerment, the kind that transforms bubbly teenage girls from brothel slaves into successful businesswomen."

The goal, in other words, is to remedy an embarrassing imperfection in present day capitalism--the unequal representation of the genders in the capitalist class. The goal is to make capitalist class inequality more perfect,

unmarred by any inequality other than class, so that capitalism will be able more effectively to defend class inequality in the name of opposing gender or racial or any other kind of non-class inequality.

Half the Sky, for example, introduces us to a Vietnamese girl whose loving father makes great personal sacrifices to enable her to attend school. In passing we learn that the father owns no land and is a dirt poor farm worker, without any social or economic support from the government. But Half the Sky pays no attention to this fact. Its focus is on an American man who has built a school in Vietnam and is helping women from poor families get an education, and on the girl's remarkable determination to get an education and thereby have a better future than working in a rice paddy like her father. The show doesn't ask the viewer to wonder why a man in Vietnam is so poor. It draws no connection between the man's poverty and the fact that one of the show's own sponsors, Nike (its Nike Foundation, to be

precise), makes big profits by operating sweatshop factories in Vietnam, as grudgingly admitted by the [World Bank here](#), and as more accurately described as "human trafficking" in [this truly shocking video](#). It is only by preventing the Vietnamese peasants from owning (collectively or otherwise) the land, that Nike and the Communist Party are able to force peasant girls and women to work in sweatshops: it's that or starve. Nike's owner, Phil Knight, was thus able to defend his exploitation of women by telling stories about Vietnamese workers waiting outside the factory doors, hoping someone would quit so they could get a job. The nerve of the man!



A Nike sweatshop (Nike employs 90% young women and girls).

Half the Sky doesn't ask the viewer to wonder if this Vietnamese girl's social class--the working class--will be any better off if more of Nike's managers and lawyers (or the ruling Communist Party's elite) are women. The show treats gender inequality the same way the African National Congress in South Africa treated racial inequality

as it led the fight against apartheid. The ANC won that fight. Apartheid was abolished. There is no legal discrimination against blacks in South Africa today, and there are blacks "climbing the ladder to success" and moving up in the world into managerial and professional positions. The presidents of South Africa have been black people for many years now.

But has this made life better for most black South Africans? The answer is no. In fact, things [are worse](#) for them. The same big corporations own the mines and other social wealth in South Africa. The "black" capitalist government defends these capitalist exploiters from the angry workers they oppress with as much violence as the old apartheid "white" capitalist government did. Only recently the government murdered thirty-four striking mine workers, as [described here](#). The conditions of work (and of life!) for mine workers are as bad now as before, as [described here](#). And the entire working class of South Africa is starting to realize that the ANC is

not really their champion, despite it having led the fight against apartheid, because it does not challenge class inequality, as [discussed here](#).

At least under apartheid the South African working class knew who its enemy was--the white pro-apartheid politicians and corporate elite. But in post-apartheid South Africa the working class is less able to fight its oppressors because the capitalist government invokes its glorious fight against racial inequality to legitimize its enforcement of class inequality. This has created confusion among South African working class people; it is very hard to fight the very people, and the very same organization, that one followed unhesitatingly before.

Half the Sky is the American capitalist class's way of trying to do on a global scale with respect to gender inequality what the big corporations did in South Africa with respect to racial inequality when they backed Nelson Mandela and the ANC and declared their emphatic opposition to apartheid.

***Half the Sky* and the Centuries-Old False Hope of Capitalism**

Capitalism, from its emergence as a revolutionary anti-feudal force, has always been about wresting inequality away from its former basis on inherited royal or aristocratic blood and setting it firmly on the very different basis of personal virtues such as thrift and business acumen that are not inherited. In practice capitalists accepted and even made use of gender and racial inequality and sometimes made peace with the privileges of royalty and aristocracy, but in theory, at least, capitalism was about creating the proverbial "level playing field" for everybody, regardless of inherited status, to compete on their personal merits alone to try to become winners in a world of winners and losers, haves and have nots. This is one of the reasons that capitalism has enjoyed whatever mass support that it has--it offers hope to the masses not born with wealthy parents or with royal or aristocratic blood.

Another related appeal of capitalism is its claim to be about personal individual freedom. Capitalism says, "You are a free individual; you are not bound by feudal obligations to a Lord, nor traditional obligations to your parents or neighbors or anybody. You can rise in the world on the basis of your own personal merits. You don't need a labor union or anything except your own intelligence and determination to succeed. You don't need solidarity with others to improve your life along with others; you need a career that will let you climb up the ladder." This is capitalism's appeal: "Don't fight to end class inequality; strive instead to rise to the top as the wonderful individual that you are, and as the smart entrepreneur or professional you can become if you go to school and study hard."

This appeal of capitalism cannot remain very persuasive, however, if there is too much evidence that personal merit does not really determine who rises and who does not. If gross inequality by inherited traits like gender and race

put the lie to the capitalist appeal, then capitalism is at risk of being overthrown the same way feudalism was. This is something that enlightened pro-capitalist thinkers know very well. It is why the authors of *Half the Sky* can get overwhelming corporate sponsorship for their project. These authors, and the many people who participated in the t.v. show, no doubt are sincerely appalled, as we all should be, by the oppression of women that the show highlights. They may not, personally, have a conscious pro-capitalist agenda. They may think they are getting big corporate sponsorship and support because rich people are as appalled by things like forced prostitution and female genital mutilation as anybody.

The fact remains, however, that all of the genuine heartfelt and praiseworthy desires of people to end the oppression of women is being channelled by the sponsors of *Half the Sky* into a 100% pro-capitalist framework. It is a framework that excludes anything directed at ending class

inequality. It does not find objectionable that the world is divided into the haves and the have nots; it only finds objectionable that the proportion of women in each of these categories is not the same as the proportion of women in the overall population. It supports only efforts that embrace the idea that the way to make the world better is to become a successful business person and aspire to succeed like the show's sponsors: Nike's Phil Knight, Bill and Melinda Gates (whose foundations never support reducing class inequality and whose goals in education and public health aim to preserve it), Coca Cola (whose sponsoring 5by20 [states](#): "Women around the world are already pillars of our business system. We are building on that foundation by implementing programs to help women entrepreneurs throughout the Coca-Cola value chain -- from fruit farmers to artisans. [View the Coca-Cola value chain.](#)"), and Goldman Sachs.

Half the Sky emphasizes the non-capitalist sources of inequality and oppression of women, such as the traditional use of female genital mutilation and the idea that a woman's place is in the home. This is in keeping with capitalism's history as a revolutionary force against feudalism and feudal inequalities. The problem with capitalism, it is important to keep in mind, is not what it is against; the problem is what it is for: class inequality. Phil Knight's exploitation of Vietnamese (and other Asian) women and girls in his sweatshops is hardly rendered acceptable just because he is horrified by female genital mutilation and forced prostitution. Goldman Sachs's impoverishment of people is not OK just because they recruit women to join them in that kind of activity. It is precisely the evil of class inequality, however, to which *Half the Sky* attempts to blind us. This is why viewers of *Half the Sky*, and readers of the book, need to keep their eyes wide open.