



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Discussion Guide for  
*Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*  
by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

The award-winning work related to *Half the Sky* has been popular and discussed broadly across the United States. It reveals the stories of women and girls in ways that have moved many as both an evocation of compassion and a call to action... The book and the subsequent movie open eyes to the depth of individual and systemic problems that are particularly gender-based: the problems affect women and girls more than they affect men and boys. The project encourages compassion and action as crucial responses to addressing the effects of patriarchal social systems. The ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice is providing this brief guide to *Half the Sky* as a means, from a perspective of faith, for entering the discussion and responding to an important call for compassion and action.

As you discuss the book and/or movie, you might find it helpful to keep in mind both some strengths and limitations of this popular work in order to develop a thoughtful approach to it. The project is crucial in raising awareness of the depth and power of sexism\* and patriarchy\*<sup>1</sup>; by showing how ugly and complex they are. Well-researched, it lifts our eyes beyond the domestic every day and delivers in an accessible way portrayals of women and girls around the world.

At the same time, the stories can “re-objectify” the women and girls. That is, their sufferings are horrifyingly depicted, but in the telling of their stories, they may be portrayed more as objects for compassion than as people with dignity. In addition, *Half the Sky* implies that women and girls should be empowered *because* they are a crucial economic asset for their families and communities. While we know that women are important to their communities, Christians would insist that there is a God-given dignity of each human regardless of their economic contribution. The project also tends to divide people implicitly into “North” and “South” or “developed nation” and “developing nation.” Lastly, the book ignores the many ways that religious bodies empower women and address root causes of gender-based problems.

Mindful of these strengths and limitations, the task force hopes this discussion guide will assist individuals and groups to have a keen eye and ear for what *Half the Sky* contributes and misses. The task force invites you to join in the conversation so that together as a church we will be able to think and act more adequately in service through faith. The book is widely available in stores and libraries and the film is available in DVD form as well as on iTunes and Netflix.

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Which woman or girl’s story affected you most deeply? Why?

---

\* *Sexism* refers to hierarchically ordered gender stereotyping, in which males are privileged over females, as expressed in a variety of ways whether cultural, economic or religious. \**Patriarchy* refers to a kind of society in which all people, males and females, participate but which promotes male power, privilege, disparity and hierarchy on the basis of gender differences. Patriarchal societies are organized, to varying degrees, around concerns for male dominance and corresponding control of and oppression of women.

2. The women and girls we read about come from many different countries. What are the commonalities in their experiences and situations across countries?
  
3. *Half the Sky* focuses on problems related to gender discrimination and human rights abuses in Africa and Asia, but some of the problems are common in North America, as well. What specific examples can you name? In what ways are the forms of gender discrimination and human rights abuses in all continents similar to each other? In what ways are they different across regions and cultures?
  
4. *Half the Sky* states, "But the reality is that as long as women and girls allow themselves to be prostituted and beaten, the abuse will continue. . . . There will be less trafficking and less rape if more women stop turning the other cheek and begin slapping back" (pages 47, 53). While women's individual reactions are important, how realistic do you think it is to "slap back?" What other changes are needed? Who bears responsibility for ending gender-based discrimination? In what ways is your answer informed by the confession that Christ sets us free to serve others?
  
5. The *Half the Sky* project wants to encourage and create social change. In what ways does it compel you to do something? And what does it compel you to do? Some observers think the project focuses too much on asking Westerners to be heroes. What do you think about this critique? How are heroism and servanthood similar and different?
  
6. A central premise of *Half the Sky* is that women and girls need to be empowered so that they can make their families and communities better. It also makes the case for the economic importance of turning gender-based oppression into opportunity (e.g., page xix). How do *you* express the importance of empowering women and girls from a faith-based perspective? What faith-based reasons do you think reflect the value and dignity of everyone, no matter their economic contributions to families and societies?
  
7. The violence we learn about in this book is grave. In what ways does faith help you to understand and respond to such violence?
  
8. *Half the Sky* helps make visible the effects of violence and oppression through the stories told. It calls on people in the West to speak up loudly on behalf of women and girls in other regions but it focuses significantly on what individuals can do and on charitable action. It gives less attention to institutional and structural changes (such as in law, policy, educational systems, cultural practices, etc.). In what ways do you think individual action matters? In what ways do you think institutional and structural change matters? Is the church called to attend to both? Why or why not?
  
9. *Half the Sky* reports virtually nothing about the abundant work going on across communities of faith. What do you know already about efforts within communities of faith, especially Lutheran communities? In what ways do you think the church intentionally or unintentionally maintains gender-based oppression? In what ways do you think the church intentionally or unintentionally changes or challenges it?
  
10. *Half the Sky* pays attention to what women and girls say they need. No matter who you are, you can listen, too. Ask women and girls in your discussion group, congregation, school, etc., what they need to be empowered. In what ways can you and/or your congregation partner with her?