

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

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HALF THE SKY

TURNING OPPRESSION INTO
OPPORTUNITY
FOR WOMEN WORLDWIDE



"Urgent. . . . Passionate. . . . Compelling. . . . *Half the Sky* is
a grab-the-reader-by-the-lapels wake-up call." —*The Boston Globe*

Emancipating Twenty-First-Century Slaves

Women might just have something to contribute to civilization
other than their vaginas.

— CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY, *Florence of Arabia*

The red-light district in the town of Forbesgunge does not actually have any red lights. Indeed, there is no electricity. The brothels are simply mud-walled family compounds along a dirt path, with thatch-roof shacks set aside for customers. Children play and scurry along the dirt paths, and a one-room shop on the corner sells cooking oil, rice, and bits of candy. Here, in the impoverished northern Indian state of Bihar, near the Nepalese border, there's not much else available commercially—except sex.

As Meena Hasina walks down the path, the children pause and stare at her. The adults stop as well, some glowering, and the tension rises. Meena is a lovely, dark-skinned Indian woman in her thirties with warm, crinkly eyes and a stud in her left nostril. She wears a sari and ties her black hair back, and she seems utterly relaxed as she strolls among people who despise her.

Meena is an Indian Muslim who for years was prostituted in a brothel run by the Nutt, a low-caste tribe that controls the local sex trade. The Nutt have traditionally engaged in prostitution and petty crime, and theirs is the world of intergenerational prostitution, in which mothers sell sex and raise their daughters to do the same.

Meena strolls through the brothels to a larger hut that functions as a part-time school, sits down, and makes herself comfortable. Behind her, the villagers gradually resume their activities.

"I was eight or nine years old when I was kidnapped and trafficked," Meena begins. She is from a poor family on the Nepal border and was sold to a Nutt clan, then taken to a rural house where the brothel



owner kept prepubescent girls until they were mature enough to attract customers. When she was twelve—she remembers that it was five months before her first period—she was taken to the brothel.

*Meena Hasina
with her son,
Virek, in Bihar, India
(Nicholas D. Kristof)*

"They brought in the first client, and they'd taken lots of money from him," Meena recounted, speaking clinically and without emotion. The induction was similar to that endured by Rath in Malaysia, for sex trafficking operates on the same business model worldwide, and the same methods are used to break girls everywhere. "I started fighting and crying out, so that he couldn't succeed," Meena said. "I resisted so much that they had to return the money to him. And they beat me mercilessly, with a belt, with sticks, with iron rods. The beating was tremendous." She shook her head to clear the memory. "But even then I resisted. They showed me swords and said they would kill me if I didn't agree. Four or five times, they brought customers in, and I still resisted, and they kept beating me. Finally they drugged me: They gave me wine in my drink and got me completely drunk." Then one of the brothel owners raped her. She awoke, hungover and hurting, and realized what had happened. "Now I am wasted," she thought, and so she gave in and stopped fighting customers.

In Meena's brothel, the tyrant was the family matriarch, Ainul Bibi. Sometimes Ainul would beat the girls herself, and sometimes she would delegate the task to her daughter-in-law or to her sons, who were brutal in inflicting punishment.

"I wasn't even allowed to cry," Meena remembers. "If even one tear



Gangsters in Bihar, India, tried to force this man to sell his daughter into prostitution. When he refused and the girl hid, they destroyed his home. The aid organization Apne Aap Women Worldwide is helping the family. (Nicholas D. Kristof)

fell, they would beat me. I used to think that it was better to die than to live like this. Once I jumped from the balcony, but nothing happened. I didn't even break a leg."

Meena and the other girls were never allowed out of the brothel and were never paid. They typically had ten or more customers a day, seven days a week. If a girl fell asleep or complained about a stomachache, the issue was resolved with a beating. And when a girl showed any hint of resistance, all the girls would be summoned to watch as the recalcitrant one was tied up and savagely beaten.

"They turned the stereo up loud to cover the screams," Meena said dryly.

India almost certainly has more modern slaves, in conditions like these, than any other country. There are 2 to 3 million prostitutes in India, and although many of them now sell sex to some degree willingly, and are paid, a significant share of them entered the sex industry unwillingly. One 2008 study of Indian brothels found that of Indian and Nepali prostitutes who started as teenagers, about half said they had been coerced into the brothels; women who began working in their twenties were more likely to have made the choice themselves, often to feed their children. Those who start out enslaved often accept their fate eventually and sell sex willingly, because they know nothing else and are too stigmatized to hold other jobs.

China has more prostitutes than India—some estimates are as high

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"*Half the Sky* is a call to arms, a call for help, a call for contributions, but also a call for volunteers. It asks us to open our eyes to this enormous humanitarian issue. It does so with exquisitely crafted prose and sensationally interesting material. . . . I really do think this is one of the most important books I have ever reviewed."

—Carolyn See, *The Washington Post*

From the first married couple to win a Pulitzer Prize for journalism, here is a passionate call to arms against the oppression of women around the globe—"the central moral challenge" of our time. Through inspiring stories of extraordinary women, Kristof and WuDunn show that the most effective way to fight global poverty is to unleash the potential of women. They also offer an uplifting do-it-yourself tool kit for those who want to help.

"Superb. . . . As Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* once catalyzed us to save our birds and better steward our earth, *Half the Sky* stands to become a classic, spurring us to spare impoverished women these terrors, and elevate them to turn around the future of their nations."

—Susan Ager, *The Plain Dealer*

"I read *Half the Sky* in one sitting, staying up until 3 a.m. to do so. It is brilliant and inspirational, and I want to shout about it from the rooftops and mountains."

—Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*

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