Excerpt: Half The Sky

INTRODUCTION
The Girl Effect
What would men be without women? Scarce, sir, mighty scarce.

— MARK TWAIN
Srey Rath is a self-confident Cambodian teenager whose black hair tumbles over a round, light brown face. She is in a crowded street market, standing beside a pushcart and telling her story calmly, with detachment. The only hint of anxiety or trauma is the way she often pushes her hair from in front of her black eyes, perhaps a nervous tic. Then she lowers her hand and her long fingers gesticulate and flutter in the air with incongruous grace as she recounts her odyssey.

Rath is short and small-boned, pretty, vibrant, and bubbly, a wisp of a girl whose negligible stature contrasts with an outsized and outgoing personality. When the skies abruptly release a tropical rain shower that drenches us, she simply laughs and rushes us to cover under a tin roof, and then cheerfully continues her story as the rain drums overhead. But Rath's attractiveness and winning personality are perilous bounties for a rural Cambodian girl, and her trusting nature and optimistic self-assuredness compound the hazard.

When Rath was fifteen, her family ran out of money, so she decided to go work as a dishwasher in Thailand for two months to help pay the bills. Her parents fretted about her safety, but they were reassured when Rath arranged to travel with four friends who had been promised jobs in the same Thai restaurant. The job agent took the girls deep into Thailand and then handed them to gangsters who took them to Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. Rath was dazzled by her first glimpses of the city's clean avenues and gleaming high-rises, including at the time the world's tallest twin buildings; it seemed safe and welcoming. But then thugs sequestered Rath and two other girls inside a karaoke lounge that operated as a brothel. One gangster in his late thirties, a man known as "the boss," took charge of the girls and explained that he had paid money for them and that they would now be obliged to repay him. "You must find money to pay off the debt, and then I will send you back home," he said, repeatedly reassuring them that if they cooperated they would eventually be released.

Rath was shattered when what was happening dawned on her. The boss locked her up with a customer, who tried to force her to have sex with him. She fought back, enraging the customer. "So the boss got angry and hit me in the face, first with one hand and then with

the other," she remembers, telling her story with simple resignation. "The mark stayed on my face for two weeks." Then the boss and the other gangsters raped her and beat her with their fists.

"You have to serve the customers," the boss told her as he punched her. "If not, we will beat you to death. Do you want that?" Rath stopped protesting, but she sobbed and refused to cooperate actively. The boss forced her to take a pill; the gangsters called it "the happy drug" or "the shake drug." She doesn't know exactly what it was, but it made her head shake and induced lethargy, happiness, and compliance for about an hour. When she wasn't drugged, Rath was teary and insufficiently compliant — she was required to beam happily at all customers — so the boss said he would waste no more time on her: She would agree to do as he ordered or he would kill her. Rath then gave in. The girls were forced to work in the brothel seven days a week, fifteen hours a day. They were kept naked to make it more difficult for them to run away or to keep tips or other money, and they were forbidden to ask customers to use condoms. They were battered until they smiled constantly and simulated joy at the sight of customers, because men would not pay as much for sex with girls with reddened eyes and haggard faces. The girls were never allowed out on the street or paid a penny for their work.

"They just gave us food to eat, but they didn't give us much because the customers didn't like fat girls," Rath says. The girls were abused, under guard, back and forth between the brothel and a tenth-floor apartment where a dozen of them were housed. The door of the apartment was locked from the outside. However, one night, some of the girls went out onto their balcony and pried loose a long, five-inch-wide board from a rack used for drying clothes. They balanced it precariously between their balcony and one on the next building, twelve feet away. The board wobbled badly, but Rath was desperate, so she sat astride the board and gradually inched across.

"There were four of us who did that," she says. "The others were too scared, because it was very rickety. I was scared, too, and I couldn't look down, but I was even more scared to stay. We thought that even if we died, it would be better than staying behind. If we stayed, we would die as well."

Once on the far balcony, the girls pounded on the window and woke the surprised tenant. They could hardly communicate with him because none of them spoke Malay, but the tenant let them into his apartment and then out its front door. The girls took the elevator down and wandered the silent streets until they found a police station and stepped inside. The police first tried to shoo them away, then arrested the girls for illegal immigration. Rath served a year in prison under Malaysia's tough anti-immigrant laws, and then she was supposed to be repatriated. She thought a Malaysian policeman was escorting her home when he drove her to the Thai border — but then he sold her to a trafficker, who peddled her to a Thai brothel.

Rath's saga offers a glimpse of the brutality inflicted routinely on women and girls in much of the world, a malignancy that is slowly gaining recognition as one of the paramount human rights problems of this century.
The issues involved, however, have barely registered on the global agenda. Indeed, when we began reporting about international affairs in the 1980s, we couldn't have imagined writing this book. We assumed that the foreign policy issues that properly furrowed the brow were lofty and complex, like nuclear nonproliferation. It was difficult back then to envision the Council on Foreign Relations fretting about maternal mortality or female genital mutilation. Back then, the oppression of women was a fringe issue, the kind of worthy cause the Girl Scouts might raise money for. We preferred to probe the recondite "serious issues."

So this book is the outgrowth of our own journey of awakening as we worked together as journalists for *The New York Times*. The first milestone in that journey came in China. Sheryl is a Chinese-American who grew up in New York City, and Nicholas is an Oregonian who grew up on a sheep and cherry farm near Yamhill, Oregon. After we married, we moved to China, where seven months later we found ourselves standing on the edge of Tiananmen Square watching troops fire their automatic weapons at prodemocracy protesters. The massacre claimed between four hundred and eight hundred lives and transfixed the world. It was the human rights story of the year, and it seemed just about the most shocking violation imaginable.
Then, the following year, we came across an obscure but meticulous demographic study that outlined a human rights violation that had claimed tens of thousands more lives. This study found that thirty-nine thousand baby girls die annually in China because parents don't give them the same medical care and attention that boys receive — and that is just in the first year of life. One Chinese family-planning official, Li Honggui, explained it this way: "If a boy gets sick, the parents may send him to the hospital at once. But if a girl gets sick, the parents may say to themselves, 'Well, let's see how she is tomorrow.' "The result is that as many infant girls die unnecessarily every week in China as protesters died in the one incident at Tiananmen. Those Chinese girls never received a column inch of news coverage, and we began to wonder if our journalistic priorities were skewed.

A similar pattern emerged in other countries, particularly in South Asia and the Muslim world. In India, a "bride burning" — to punish a woman for an inadequate dowry or to eliminate her so a man can remarry — takes place approximately once every two hours, but these rarely constitute news. In the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan, five thousand women and girls have been doused in kerosene and set alight by family members or in-laws — or, perhaps worse, been seared with acid — for perceived disobedience just in the last nine years. Imagine the outcry if the Pakistani or Indian governments were burning women alive at those rates. Yet when the government is not directly involved, people shrug.

When a prominent dissident was arrested in China, we would write a front-page article; when 100,000 girls were routinely kidnapped and trafficked into brothels, we didn't even consider it news. Partly that is because we journalists tend to be good at covering events

that happen on a particular day, but we slip at covering events that happen every day — such as the quotidian cruelties inflicted on women and girls. We journalists weren't the only ones who dropped the ball on this subject: Less than 1 percent of U. S. foreign aid is specifically targeted to women and girls.

Amartya Sen, the ebullient Nobel Prize–winning economist, has developed a gauge of gender inequality that is a striking reminder of the stakes involved. "More than 100 million women are missing," Sen wrote in a classic essay in 1990 in The New York Review of Books, spurring a new field of research. Sen noted that in normal circumstances women live longer than men, and so there are more females than males in much of the world. Even poor regions like most of Latin America and much of Africa have more females than males. Yet in places where girls have a deeply unequal status, they vanish. China has 107 males for every 100 females in its overall population (and an even greater disproportion among newborns), India has 108, and Pakistan has 111. This has nothing to do with biology, and indeed the state of Kerala in the southwest of India, which has championed female education and equality, has the same excess of females that exists in the United States.

The implication of the sex ratios, Professor Sen found, is that about 107 million females are missing from the globe today. Follow-up studies have calculated the number slightly differently, deriving alternative figures for "missing women" of between 60 million and 101 million. Every year, at least another 2 million girls worldwide disappear because of gender discrimination.

In the wealthy countries of the West, discrimination is usually a matter of unequal pay or underfunded sports teams or unwanted touching from a boss. In contrast, in much of the world discrimination is lethal. In India, for example, mothers are less likely to take their daughters to be vaccinated than their sons — that alone accounts for one fifth of India's missing females — while studies have found that, on average, girls are brought to the hospital only when they are sicker than boys taken to the hospital. All told, girls in India from one to five years of age are 50 percent more likely to die than boys the same age. The best estimate is that a little Indian girl dies from discrimination every four minutes.

A big, bearded Afghan named Sedanshah once told us that his wife and son were sick. He wanted both to survive, he said, but his priorities were clear: A son is an indispensable treasure, while a wife is replaceable. He had purchased medication for the boy alone."She's always sick," he gruffly said of his wife, "so it's not worth buying medicine for her."

Modernization and technology can aggravate the discrimination. Since the 1990s, the spread of ultrasound machines has allowed pregnant women to find out the sex of their fetuses — and then get abortions if they are female. In Fujian Province, China, a peasant raved to us about ultrasound: "We don't have to have daughters anymore!"

To prevent sex-selective abortion, China and India now bar doctors and ultrasound technicians from telling a pregnant woman the sex of her fetus. Yet that is a flawed solution. Research shows that when parents are banned from selectively aborting female fetuses, more of their daughters die as infants. Mothers do not deliberately dispatch infant girls they are obligated to give birth to, but they are lackadaisical in caring for them. A development economist at Brown University, Nancy Qian, quantified the wrenching trade-off: On average, the deaths of fifteen infant girls can be avoided by allowing one hundred female fetuses to be selectively aborted.

The global statistics on the abuse of girls are numbing. It appears that more girls have been killed in the last fifty years, precisely because they were girls, than men were killed in all the wars of the twentieth century. More girls are killed in this routine "gendercide" in any one decade than people were slaughtered in all the genocides of the twentieth century.

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 in the developing world.

The owners of the Thai brothel to which Rath was sold did not beat her and did not constantly guard her. So two months later, she was able to escape and make her way back to Cambodia. Upon her return, Rath met a social worker who put her in touch with an aid group that helps girls who have been trafficked start new lives. The group, American Assistance for Cambodia, used $400 in donated funds to buy a small cart and a starter selection of goods so that Rath could become a street peddler. She found a good spot in the open area between the Thai and Cambodian customs offices in the border town of Poipet. Travelers crossing between Thailand and Cambodia walk along this strip, the size of a football field, and it is lined with peddlers selling drinks, snacks, and souvenirs.
Rath outfitted her cart with shirts and hats, costume jewelry, notebooks, pens, and small toys. Now her good looks and outgoing personality began to work in her favor, turning her into an effective saleswoman. She saved and invested in new merchandise, her business thrived, and she was able to support her parents and two younger sisters. She married and had a son, and she began saving for his education.

In 2008, Rath turned her cart into a stall, and then also acquired the stall next door. She also started a "public phone" business by charging people to use her cell phone. So if you ever cross from Thailand into Cambodia at Poipet, look for a shop on your left, halfway down the strip, where a teenage girl will call out to you, smile, and try to sell you a souvenir cap. She'll laugh and claim she's giving you a special price, and she's so bubbly and appealing that she'll probably make the sale.

Rath's eventual triumph is a reminder that if girls get a chance, in the form of an education or a microloan, they can be more than

baubles or slaves; many of them can run businesses. Talk to Rath today — after you've purchased that cap — and you find that she exudes confidence as she earns a solid income that will provide a better future for her sisters and for her young son. Many of the stories in this book are wrenching, but keep in mind this central truth: *Women aren't the problem but the solution. The plight of girls is no more a tragedy than an opportunity.*

That was a lesson we absorbed in Sheryl's ancestral village, at the end of a dirt road amid the rice paddies of southern China. For many years we have regularly trod the mud paths of the Taishan region to Shunshui, the hamlet in which Sheryl's paternal grandfather grew up. China traditionally has been one of the more repressive and smothering places for girls, and we could see hints of this in Sheryl's own family history. Indeed, on our first visit, we accidentally uncovered a family secret: a long-lost step-grandmother. Sheryl's grandfather had traveled to America with his first wife, but she had given birth only to daughters. So Sheryl's grandfather gave up on her and returned her to Shunshui, where he married a younger woman as a second wife and took her to America. This was Sheryl's grandmother, who duly gave birth to a son — Sheryl's dad. The previous wife and daughters were then wiped out of the family memory.

Something bothered us each time we explored Shunshui and the surrounding villages: Where were the young women? Young men were toiling industriously in the paddies or fanning themselves indolently in the shade, but young women and girls were scarce. We finally discovered them when we stepped into the factories that were then spreading throughout Guangdong Province, the epicenter of China's economic eruption. These factories produced the shoes, toys, and shirts that filled America's shopping malls, generating economic growth rates almost unprecedented in the history of the world — and creating the most effective antipoverty program ever recorded. The factories turned out to be cacophonous hives of distaff bees. Eighty percent of the employees on the assembly lines in coastal China are female, and the proportion across the manufacturing belt of East Asia is at least 70 percent. The economic explosion in Asia was, in large part, an outgrowth of the economic empowerment of women. "They have smaller fingers, so they're better at stitching," the manager of a purse factory explained to us. "They're obedient and work harder than men," said the head of a toy factory." And we can pay them less."

Women are indeed a linchpin of the region's development strategy. Economists who scrutinized East Asia's success noted a common pattern. These countries took young women who previously had contributed negligibly to gross national product (GNP) and injected them into the formal economy, hugely increasing the labor force. The basic formula was to ease repression, educate girls as well as boys, give the girls the freedom to move to the cities and take factory jobs, and then benefit from a demographic dividend as they delayed marriage and reduced childbearing. The women meanwhile financed the education of younger relatives, and saved enough of their pay to boost national savings rates. This pattern has been called "the girl effect." In a nod to the female chromosomes, it could also be called "the double X solution."

Evidence has mounted that helping women can be a successful poverty-fighting strategy anywhere in the world, not just in the booming economies of East Asia. The Self Employed Women's Association was founded in India in 1972 and ever since has supported the poorest women in starting businesses — raising living standards in ways that have dazzled scholars and foundations.

In Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus developed microfinance at the Grameen Bank and targeted women borrowers — eventually winning a Nobel Peace Prize for the economic and social impact of his work. Another Bangladeshi group, BRAC, the largest antipoverty organization in the world, worked with the poorest women to save lives and raise incomes — and Grameen and BRAC made the aid world increasingly see women not just as potential beneficiaries of their work, but as agents of it.

In the early 1990s, the United Nations and the World Bank began to appreciate the potential resource that women and girls represent. "Investment in girls' education may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world," Lawrence Summers wrote when he was chief economist of the World Bank. "The question is not whether countries can afford this investment, but whether countries can afford not to educate more girls." In 2001 the World Bank produced an influential study, Engendering Development Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice, arguing that promoting gender equality is crucial to combat global poverty. UNICEF issued a major report arguing that gender equality yields a "double dividend" by elevating not only women but also their children and communities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) summed up the mounting research this way: "Women's empowerment helps raise economic productivity and reduce infant mortality. It contributes to improved health and nutrition. It increases the chances of education for the next generation."

More and more, the most influential scholars of development and public health — including Sen and Summers, Joseph Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs, and Dr. Paul Farmer — are calling for much greater attention to women in development. Private aid groups and foundations have shifted gears as well." Women are the key to ending hunger in Africa," declared the Hunger Project. French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, who founded Doctors Without Borders, bluntly declared of development: "Progress is achieved through women." The Center for Global Development issued a major report explaining "why and how to put girls at the center of development. "CARE is taking women and girls as the centerpiece of its antipoverty efforts. The Nike Foundation and the NoVo Foundation are both focusing on building opportunities for girls in the developing world. "Gender inequality hurts economic growth," Goldman Sachs concluded in a 2008 research report that emphasized how much developing countries could improve their economic performance by educating girls. Partly as a result of that research, Goldman Sachs committed $100 million to a"10,000 Women" campaign meant to give that many women a business education.

Concerns about terrorism after the 9/11 attacks triggered interest in these issues in an unlikely constituency: the military and counterterrorism agencies. Some security experts noted that the countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionally those where women are marginalized. The reason there are so many Muslim terrorists, they argued, has little to do with the Koran but a great deal to do with the lack of robust female participation in the economy and society of many Islamic countries. As the Pentagon gained a deeper understanding of counterterrorism, and as it found that dropping bombs often didn't do much to help, it became increasingly interested in grassroots projects such as girls' education. Empowering girls, some in the military argued, would disempower terrorists. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff hold discussions of girls' education in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as they did in 2008, you know that gender is a serious topic that fits squarely on the international affairs agenda. That's evident also in the Council on Foreign Relations. The wood-paneled halls that have been used for discussions of MIRV warheads and NATO policy are now employed as well to host well-attended sessions on maternal mortality.

We will try to lay out an agenda for the world's women focusing on three particular abuses: sex trafficking and forced prostitution; gender-based violence, including honor killings and mass rape; and maternal mortality, which still needlessly claims one woman a minute. We will lay out solutions such as girls' education and microfinance, which are working right now.
It's true that there are many injustices in the world, many worthy causes competing for attention and support, and we all have divided allegiances. We focus on this topic because, to us, this kind of oppression feels transcendent — and so does the opportunity. We have seen that outsiders can truly make a significant difference.

Consider Rath once more. We had been so shaken by her story that we wanted to locate that brothel in Malaysia, interview its owners, and try to free the girls still imprisoned there. Unfortunately, we couldn't determine the brothel's name or address. (Rath didn't know English or even the Roman alphabet, so she hadn't been able to read signs when she was there.) When we asked her if she would be willing to return to Kuala Lumpur and help us find the brothel, she turned ashen. "I don't know," she said. "I don't want to face that again." She wavered, talked it over with her family, and ultimately agreed to go back in the hope of rescuing her girlfriends.

Rath voyaged back to Kuala Lumpur with the protection of an interpreter and a local antitrafficking activist. Nonetheless, she trembled in the red-light districts upon seeing the cheerful neon signs that she associated with so much pain. But since her escape, Malaysia had been embarrassed by public criticism about trafficking, so the police had cracked down on the worst brothels that imprisoned girls against their will. One of those was Rath's. A modest amount of international scolding had led a government to take action, resulting in an observable improvement in the lives of girls at the bottom of the power pyramid. The outcome underscores that this is a hopeful cause, not a bleak one.

Honor killings, sexual slavery, and genital cutting may seem to Western readers to be tragic but inevitable in a world far, far away. In much the same way, slavery was once widely viewed by many decent Europeans and Americans as a regrettable but ineluctable feature of human life. It was just one more horror that had existed for thousands of years. But then in the 1780s a few indignant Britons, led by William Wilberforce, decided that slavery was so offensive that they had to abolish it. And they did. Today we see the seed of something similar: a global movement to emancipate women and girls.

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.

This is a story of transformation. It is change that is already taking place, and change that can accelerate if you'll just open your heart and join in.