



Can Women Solve the World's Woes? A Q&A with *Half the Sky* authors Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

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About BSR

A leader in corporate responsibility since 1992, BSR works with its global network of more than 250 member companies to develop sustainable business strategies and solutions through consulting, research, and cross-sector collaboration. With six offices in Asia, Europe, and North America, BSR uses its expertise in the environment, human rights, economic development, and governance and accountability to guide global companies toward creating a just and sustainable world. Visit www.bsr.org for more information.

In October 2009, *New York Times* journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn published a powerful call to action in their book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. The Pulitzer Prize-winning authors posit that individuals and organizations worldwide can advance economic progress and fight poverty by investing in women and girls.

In our own work, BSR has explored the social and economic benefits of investing in women through grant-funded initiatives such as [HERproject](#) and participation in the creation of the Women's Empowerment Principles, which are led by the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the UN Global Compact.

We spoke with Kristof and WuDunn about how business can contribute to women's equality and empowerment, and how to turn those investments into opportunities for women, local communities, and companies.

What are the main types of oppression women face today in the developing world, and how could these be turned into opportunities?

Women are marginalized, undereducated, and underemployed, and in some cases denied food and health care. When they are educated and brought into the labor force, they benefit, of course—but so do their husbands and children, and the larger community. In *Half the Sky*, we write about an Ethiopian woman named Mamitu who suffered a childbirth injury called a fistula. At the hospital where she was treated, she learned to help out in surgeries and eventually to do surgeries herself. She's now one of the world's leading fistula surgeons—and everybody benefits as a result.

Is there a particular role for business in providing these opportunities, for instance through employment, through products sold to women, and/or through strategic philanthropy?

Jobs are crucial and often more important than aid. We're huge believers in manufacturing, because it tends to be a large employer of women and an escalator for them. Various aid projects are also important: Microfinance tends to encourage women to enter the business world—and then use the money they earn to educate their children and break the cycle of poverty.

There's been a lot of talk recently about using public-private partnerships to address development challenges. What is your opinion of this trend, and could you share some examples of effective partnerships?

We're fans. For example, one of the market failures in many poor countries is that there is under-investment in education, even though educating girls may be the single highest-return investment in the developing world. So some public-private partnerships have worked on improving state schools and ensuring teachers actually show up. That's a huge benefit.

You argue that educating and empowering women is profitable for families and countries. At BSR, we have found this to be true for companies as well—especially when it comes to investing in women’s health. Can you elaborate on this idea of the return on investment for educating, empowering, and investing in women?

The data are still woolly, and they suffer a bit from being gathered mostly by people who believe in the cause. But it does seem that investments in girls' education and women's health are just that—productive investments. For example, de-worming a person costs 50 cents and reduces malnutrition, anemia, and absenteeism hugely. Helping women with contraception, when they want it, is also a terrific investment. And there are many other examples.

Our light manufacturing member companies have long benefitted from factories in Asia. Do you have recommendations for how business can support the growth of the light manufacturing industry in Africa?

It would help hugely if the United States merged its AGOA program (Africa Growth and Opportunity, which encourages exports from Africa) with the European equivalent, EBA (Everything But Arms, which is mostly just for show). If manufacturers knew there was a large European/American market they could aim for, with common rules, there would be more investment and more production. But corporations can also lead the way. Right now, lots of companies have CSR or philanthropic projects in Liberia, for example, but what Liberia needs most desperately is regular factories and jobs.

You describe education, health, and access to finance (both loans and savings accounts) as critical areas of investment to improve the status of women and enable them to contribute to economic growth. What are some examples of successful investment in these areas that companies could contribute to or replicate?

Supporting micro-savings programs in a surrounding community may be one of the best ways to improve development outcomes. Right now, poor people typically get income only once or twice a year, after a harvest, and have no safe way to save the money. They can keep it in a tin can in their huts, or, if they deposit it with money-changers, they have to pay substantial interest rates for the privilege of saving. We would love to see companies, especially those with retail networks, experiment with taking deposits (perhaps in a nonprofit co-op) to encourage saving.

In a comparison of gender equity in India and China, you mention that “leading Indian business executives have noted one of their country’s weaknesses is that it does not employ women as efficiently as China.” What does it mean to employ women efficiently?

One gauge of a country's level of development is the proportion of the formal labor force made up of women. In rural India, too many women are illiterate and pretty much confined to the home. They are squandered assets. In contrast, China figured out very astutely how to take rural girls, educate them, give them the autonomy to move to coastal areas, and then reap the benefits as they entered the labor force.

Your book ends with four things individuals can do now to help end oppression of women and support their empowerment. What are some things businesses can do?

Much depends on the region and the nature of the business. But businesses can do precisely what we have tried to do with *Half the Sky*: Spread the word. So many of these problems, from sex trafficking to maternal mortality, exist because

no one pays attention. Shine a light on them, and they begin to go away. It has been our obliviousness that has nurtured these problems, and we would hope that the business community could not only make improvements in the places they operate but also help spread the word about these issues. We also list some great organizations in this space at www.halftheskymovement.org. So come join the revolution!