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'Half the Sky' overwhelms, offers hope

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Oct. 1, 2012 NCR Today

"Half the Sky"
9 p.m. Eastern/8 p.m. Central Oct. 1 and Oct. 2
PBS

Almost every review I have read of the book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* [1] (by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, 2009, Knopf) begins by saying that "a Chinese proverb says that women hold up half the sky," and I can see no better opening to a review of this Independent Lens PBS documentary that is at once compelling, overwhelming, hopeful and life-changing.

Husband-and-wife team Kristof, a New York *Times* columnist, and WuDunn, formerly of *The New York Times*, are now filmmakers who have made a sight and sound companion to their book. The stories of women in the film who suffer are harrowing and heroic, deeply sad and disturbing; the women who embody the changes in education, health and economic development are nothing short of courageous.

Several American celebrities accompany the filmmakers on their journeys: America Ferrera, Diane Lane, Meg Ryan, Eva Mendes, Gabrielle Union, Olivia Wilde, George Clooney and other public figures. The authors talk about how they got involved in the plight of women, and the actresses reveal their own growth in awareness of the mistreatment of women: that women are expendable; that economic need, and not just cultural traditions, propels the continuation of female gentile mutilation (cutting or circumcision) in Somalia by women practitioners, one of whom performs 10 to 12 cuts a day. Maternal mortality, almost all preventable, is shockingly high -- but one nurse is making a difference.

This film explores the feminization of poverty in undeniable ways through the women's voices and witness.

Intergenerational prostitution in India, gender-based violence in Sierra Leone, AIDS and high school fees in Kenya, and sex trafficking in Cambodia are all realities that enslave women, realities governments are doing little to change. Yet personal initiative and the work of nonprofit groups are empowering women to change and take charge through economic development, education and health care.

"Half the Sky" [2] is about "turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide." It's must-see TV that begs each viewer to ask during and after: What can I do to make a difference?

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Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/Half-Sky-Oppression-Opportunity-Worldwide/dp/0307267148
[2] http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/half-the-sky