

## Saving half the world's population

### Charles R. Larson probes the miseries women go through

**H**OW many books make a significant difference in matters that concern everyone who lives on earth? You can probably count the titles on one hand. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, husband and wife, have certainly written such a book. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* is the most important book that I have read since *Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*, published in 1962. I am not alone in saying that this is the most significant book that I have ever reviewed.

Because it is necessary to summarize many of the unsettling examples in Kristof and WuDunn's groundbreaking work, I'm going to quote profusely from the book itself. Then, I'll explain why this information has been so frequently ignored. Finally, I will identify a number of the constructive suggestions the writers provide for changing a playing field that has always been deeply tilted against women.

Quoted below are a number of disturbing passages, a fraction of the incredible facts the book reveals:

About China: "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 of Tiananmen [Square]."

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 battles 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."

"Some security experts [have]

noted that the countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionately 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."

"Half of the women in Sierra Leone endured sexual violence or the threat of it during the upheavals in that country, and a United Nations report claims that 90 percent of girls and women over the age of three were sexually abused in parts of Liberia during civil war."

"The equivalent of five jumbo jets' worth of women die in labor each day, but the issue is almost never covered."

"Another study found that each \$1 million spent on condoms saved \$466 million in AIDS-related costs."

"[The] sex slave trade in the twenty-first century...is bigger than the transatlantic slave trade was in the nineteenth."

These are all mind-blowing figures, coalescing around the on-going treatment of females around the world today, especially in developing countries. Honor killings, abortions of female fetuses (in favor of males), rape, sexual trafficking, genital mutilation, denial of contraceptives, these examples of inequality between men and women can be explained almost entirely by gender inequality. Many cultures place a higher value on boys than on girls, frequently refuse to educate girls at all, and deny them medical help. When girls are little older than babies (although these atrocities can happen to infants also), rape and sexual trafficking follow, often involving girls barely in their teens.

The authors themselves (both writers for the New York Times) con-

fess to having ignored gender issues early in their careers. Foreign policy issues dictated their attention to other matters that at the time seemed more urgent. Together, they covered the Tiananmen Square massacre and won a Pulitzer for their work. The following year, they stumbled across

the status of women.... Over the past one hundred years, it has become least in the cities of the best places to grow up female. Urban Chinese men typically involve themselves more in household tasks like cooking and child care than most American men do."

The discussion of China continues with the note that Sheryl WuDunn's maternal grandmother grew up with her feet bound, practice all but abolished in China today. If China was able to eliminate that terrible barrier for women progressing, certainly other cultures can also alter debilitating cultural practices. The authors provide a quick historical summary of how the British especially William Wilberforce changed world opinions about slavery during the nineteenth century in order to provide another example of social change. There's even a challenge to cultural relativism: "If we believe firmly in certain values, such as the equality of all human beings regardless of color and gender, then we should not be afraid to stand up for them; it would be reckless to defer to slavery, torture, foot-binding, honor killings, or genital cutting just because we believe in respecting other faiths or cultures."

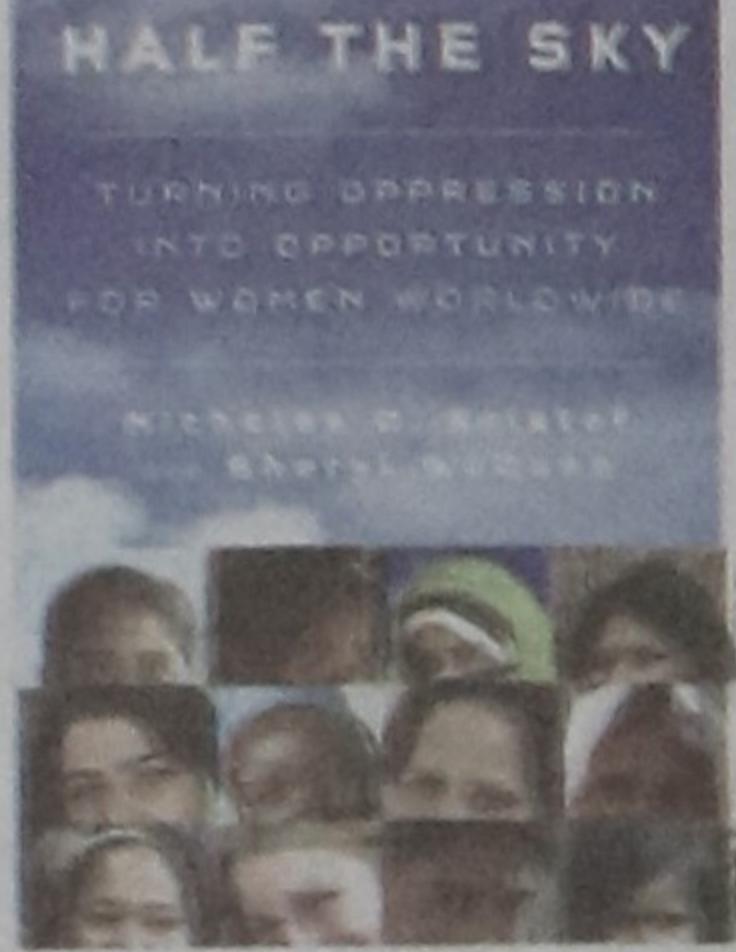
The book provides dozens of mini-narratives of women (and occasionally men) often in the countries themselves under discussion but also in the West getting involved in global issues. Sometimes, it is as simple as high school students in the United States linking with women in need overseas, fundraising, and helping individual women with education, microfinance, and health. A number of these grass-roots organizations have subsequently developed a global reach. The mini-studies included throughout the book are inspiring but this is probably

most important also practical.

Kristof and WuDunn want to activate many more people. There's a lengthy appendix at the end of the volume, listing organizations through which people can volunteer their time, send money, or help disseminate information about the basic needs of women around the world. *Half the Sky* is very much a how-to book; the writers have identified the glaring inequities between the lives of males and females in the developing world and their unbelievable economic and personal consequences. Then they have identified dozens of practical solutions (whether governments are appropriating money to other kinds of projects or individuals sending modest monthly checks to help girls in an African country to keep them going to school.) Everyone can do something to help. Will that happen? It's somewhat doubtful, because too many Americans are interested only in themselves. They don't want a penny of their taxes to be spent on someone else.

*Half the Sky* is a ground-breaking, eye-opening book, stunning in every sense. If it doesn't change the way we see the magnitude of problems directly attributable to gender inequality and if it does not alter our responses to the appalling circumstances of most girls and women in the developing nations of the world, then we are simply endorsers of a no longer acceptable status quo. Kristof and WuDunn compel us to understand that the social, economic, and political consequences of gender discrimination are the issues of the twenty-first century. But they may be preaching to the choir.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University, Washington DC.



**Half the Sky**  
Turning Oppression into Opportunity  
for Women Worldwide  
Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl  
WuDunn, Knopf

a human rights study that noted that "thirty-nine thousand baby girls die annually in China" because of gender inequality in health care. Repeatedly, they note that statistics from disparate countries are rarely compiled to document a worldwide pattern of all-too-common atrocities against girls and women.

Ironically, the title of this book comes from a statement made by Chairman Mao: "Women hold up half the sky." China is used as the primary example of a country that has made major progress in "improv-

## Looking for pearls in an oyster

### Subrata Kumar Das finds a philosophical man

**I**F I am asked, "What is or what should be your philosophy of life?" I'll simply reply, "This universe is the expression of unadulterated and unfathomable love. That 'love' is the single reason of the expression of me too. So, my only philosophy is to realize that love and spread it as much as possible. My appearance on this earth is also for this.... The height of a man can be measured with the power and sphere of his love." Nuhul, the protagonist of the debut novel *Nuhul Monchitro* by Sheikh Almamun expresses his ideologies this way. Yes, no doubt, it sounds really very philosophical, which the novel abounds in wholeheartedly.

The novel opens with Nuhul, in an illusive mental state. And gradually he delves into his childhood days to the recent present. At such moments when the writer attempts to present the shaping of Nuhul's personality in his early life, we find Tarab, Nuhul's father, state his own views on the idea. The beautiful picturization of Tarab's childhood and adolescence are related, with the concomitant disputes and dilemmas.

In the beginning comes the dilemma between Bangalis and Nolias. Tarab belongs to the ethnic group called Nolia, who are rather few in number and live in a remote village in the district of Mymensingh. He is a descendant of the Nolia community, whose profession is making household things from a type of bamboo called 'noli'. Along with this Tarab gets entangled with two other conflicts: one is his interaction with David Morris, a European

representative of the nearby Christian church, and the other is Tarab's romantic involvement with a Garo girl, which actually is discouraged in his community.

Gradually we meet a philosophical man in Tarab who wants to discover the root of his community; and when he gets the clue that it might be in India's Orissa that he will come across people of his own community, Tarab loses little time in starting out for the unknown place.

Returning from there, Tarab changes his profession and goes looking for pearls in oysters. The story of Tarab proves really interesting and it is instrumental in paving the way for his son Nuhul to become a purely philosophical man. At the end of Tarab's own story we find his resolute approach where he is determined to bring up his son as a different personality, unlike his fellow community members.

At the beginning of the novel, we get introduced to Nuhul talking to a person, in his spell, who seems to be the college girl he did not talk to but whom he had placed in his mind. Sometimes it seems that the discourse that goes on with philosophical ideas and thoughts are actually two different facets of Nuhul's own self.

At a point it gradually becomes evident that Nuhul is actually looking for answers to some questions the questions that every individual tries to ask and find answers to on his own. Nuhul, like many other individuals before him, is also trying to shape and reshape those answers that he has discovered through his own experi-



**Nuhul Monchitro**  
Sheikh Almamun  
Sangbad, Dhaka

ence of life. His plan is to publish those findings, or answers, in the form of a book not to become a popular writer but rather to give a detailed exposition of his discovery.

While engaged thus, Nuhul begins with his early days when the intellect of an individual acquires shape and substance. Nuhul's story includes his family and friends, but mostly his grandfather, classmate Siddique and

The days spent at college days, outside of his home, give a new shape to Nuhul's landscape. He develops a plan to write books and so after graduation he settles in his village and educates the children of his own community. But Nuhul's plans are not received well by people around him neither his family nor the society he is part of. He eventually decides to spend some days in seclusion, out of sight of all his acquaintances.

During his exile, Nuhul meets a sanyasin who teaches him how to control the six temptations: desire, anger, greed, pride, envy and disgrace. During his days there he gets introduced to the caves that teach man how to control one's own self. By the time Nuhul returns from the sanyasin, he is a changed man inwardly as well as outwardly. But society cannot take him in easily some comment that he has been in the spiritual way, some call him a fake. On the other hand, the girl living inside his mind flashes frequently, owing to which he again decides to leave society for the cave. On his way from the cave on a boat trip, a nor'wester dishevels him, and eventually we find him floating on the muddy river shore, with some torn pages of his dairy which are in fact the manuscript of his long-planned book.

Nuhul Monchitro is an overlapping of 'bildungsroman' and philosophical novels. Every reader will possibly enjoy the way Almamun delineates the character of Nuhul. In this respect the other bildungsroman novels written in Bengali could be remembered. Bibhutibhushan

Bandopadhyay's (1894-1950) *Pather Panchali* and Humayun Azad's (1948-2004) *Sab Kichhu Bhenge Pare* are the best instances in this regard. Sulekhya Sanyal's (1928-62) *Nobangkur or Akimun Rahman*'s (b. 1959) *Roktopunjye Getha Jaua Machhi* are also worthy examples from a woman's point of view. Nuhul Monchitro will increase the list, no doubt.

We have also come across novels that tell of philosophical ideologies. In this context the Bengalis will easily recall *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre.

The power of the novel starts from the cover page and persists right till the last one. The art work by Sabysachi Hazra shows a somewhat different image which actually relates to something supernatural. Even the dedication page signifies the bravura of the novelist by using the water shadow of his mother's bust, an inconceivable boon done by any serious writer in Bangla language. All the fifteen divisions of the book have a small text of a front page, a gemlike thing, which could be citable for its brevity. The bearded longhaired face of the novelist in the last flap declares that he does not consider himself a writer till date.

No doubt, Nuhul Monchitro is a very meticulous production by Sangbad. Error-free books are probably a rarity in Bangladesh's publishing industry. But Perviz Hossain, the publisher, is deserving of appreciation for his diligent and good performance.

Subrata Kumar Das is a teacher and essayist.

## The empowerment of citizens

### Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman praises a work on information rights

**R**Ight to information has been playing a vital role in reshaping the state machinery and ensuring greater participation of people in different countries across the globe.

One such book that depicts change in the state mechanism through participation of people vis-a-vis Information Act is *Our Rights Our Information*. The book has recently been translated in Bangla by Altaf Pervez and Mizan Ali. They call it *Amader Tothyo Amader Odhikar*.

The Bangla edition of the book has been published jointly by Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and Nagrik Udyog. It provides case studies from some Commonwealth countries (part of western democracy) as well as developing nations.

The Bangla edition of the book has arrived at such a point of time when its need was probably felt the most. Bangladesh's Jatiya Sangsads passed legislation in this regard in February 2009. This law has been enacted and implemented in eighty other countries so far. The law enacted in this country though has some limitations as it restricts citizens from seeking information about eight different agencies as they are supposedly related to the security of the state. The passage of the law, however, widens people's participation and involvement in national activities.

Citizens of Australia and New

Zealand took full advantage of the Information Act when their governments made attempts to suppress vital information regarding a genetically engineered variety of corn approved only for animal consumption. It was actually being sold for human consumption during 2001-2004. People's participation to plumb the depths of the matter brought the issue into media lime-light and was dubbed as Corngate Scandal.

Despite many years of having access to information legislation, some bureaucracies continue to deny such rights, especially that which is inconvenient and embarrassing.

However, the public can be inspired to campaign when they perceive that information is being withheld irrationally or to favour illegitimate interests.

Through using the law with regard to Right to Information, a scandal of corruption and bribery was unearthed in the school admission system in Thailand. In early 1998, a young Thai girl named Nathanan took the standard entrance examination for admission to the well regarded state primary school, an examination she had been working towards for two years. Nathanan was told that she had failed the examination and could not be admitted to the school even if they did not make the grade.

Sumalee Limpa-Owart asked the

rector of the school if she could see her daughter's answer sheet and marks awarded, she was refused. Two months later, Sumalee used Thailand's official Information Act to

public information and had to be disclosed. The school and parents of the students who had secured admission resisted, claiming that the information was private and should not be released. In fact, 109 of them got together and took Sumalee to court claiming their right to privacy and accusing her of abusing her position as a state public prosecutor. Despite the Commission's order in favour of Sumalee, the school continued to deny their obligation.

Midway through the two-year legal battle to receive information on her daughter's marks, Sumalee was offered a compromise by the school. She was allowed to inspect the list of test results of all students that had taken the entrance examination, but all names were removed. The list showed that one third of the students who had been admitted to the school had in fact received failing grade.

Sumalee suspected that this was not an unusual occurrence for the school, which had rumours of corruption and bribery swirling around it regarding the admission of children who were well connected or belonged to elite families. It was alleged that the parents often paid "tea money" or used social connections to get their children admitted to the school even if they did not make the grade.

Sumalee continued with her legal battle against the school and in 2000,

the Supreme Court of Thailand ruled that the complete list of students, including names of candidates, must be disclosed. The records revealed that a majority of the students who had secured admission, regardless of their poor performance in the entrance examination, belonged to leading political and business families. The information led to media and public outrage and more families of children who had been denied entry requested information from the school through using the Information Act.

Sumalee's experience illustrates how information sought to redress individual grievance can lead to larger policy changes that benefit the whole community. Her complaint touched on injustice which reverberated throughout the country. Sumalee prompted similar queries, breaking the habitual acceptance of unfair practices. Her action catalyzed a nationwide campaign for better access to education for all children, not just for those from a privileged background.

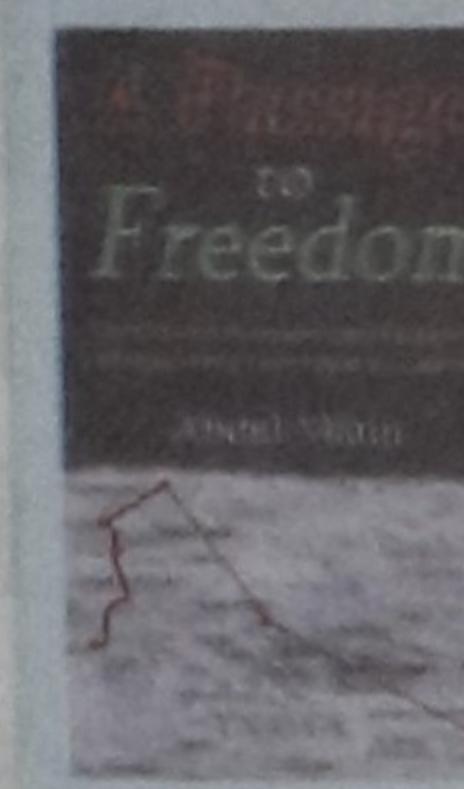
Altaf Pervez is a researcher and an author. He has conducted research on garment workers and the garment industry, sweepers' colony and a host of other topical issues. Mizan Ali, a former journalist is now working as an entrepreneur.

Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman is a working journalist. e-mail: khairz@yahoo.com

Amader Tothyo Amader Odhikar (Our Rights Our Information) Translation Altaf Pervez, Mizan Ali Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), Nagrik Udyog

request access to her daughter's marks and answer script. In November 1998, the official Information Commission ruled that the answer sheets and marks of Nathanan and the 120 students who were admitted to the school were

## AT A GLANCE



**A Passage to Freedom**  
Abdul Matin  
Adorn Publication

It is a work which takes you back to the dark days of 1971. And darkness was especially a big part of the lives of Bengalis who lived through the nine-month war for Bangladesh's liberation in West Pakistan and then, after 16 December, as hostages in what remained of Pakistan. It is a tale of courage, grand escape and arriving back home to a free country. It will give your memories a good jog.

### Reaching Beyond Words

Tulip Chowdhury  
Eufograff

Tulip Chowdhury has been into writing for a good number of years. This happens to be a collection of some of the write-ups which have in the last few years appeared in print here in Dhaka. She brings a fresh new perspective to thinking, as is evident through the aesthetic manner in which she handles her subjects.

### Maashik Uttoradikhar

Ashwin 1416  
Bangla Academy Literary  
Journal

Without question a rich representation of Bangladesh's literary heritage, this journal ought to be a must read for those ready and willing to uphold culture. In this issue, you get an array of essays, poetry and everything else that sets you thinking about human intelligence and creativity. Get a copy now, from Bangla Academy.

### The New Anthem

#### The Subcontinent In Its Own Words

Ed. Ahmed Hussain  
Tranquebar

Editor Ahmed Hussain has done a splendid job of bringing the subcontinent, as it were and as it is in fact, together in this work. Writers from all across a land that once was united until bad politics and worse communalism ripped it apart make their contributions here. The creative imagination of the region is at work, to our intense delight.

Thus begins the enchanting tale of *The Enchantress of Florence*. And perhaps at the apex of his career Salman Rushdie, pulling colourful threads of history in the background, fuses lore, legends and facts to form a sea of stories much like the one showed to 'Haroun' by his father and talked about by Rushdie in many of his lectures. This novel, a sea tormented by a tempest of carnal as well as divine love, doesn't fall in between the East and the West but encompasses both of them. And not as a bridge between the two worlds but more of a circle containing everything is the image of a woman: Qara Koz, Lady Black Eyes.

This enigmatic princess is supposedly a descendant of Genghis Khan and is also the Mughal emperor's great aunt. Being the Angelina Jolie of her time, she was captured by a warlord and then, through the skillful use of beauty and sorcery, she climbed the beds of many powerful men, ultimately ending up in the arms of commander Argalia. It is during this dangerous travel across the arms of kings and commanders that Qara Koz moves from the East to the West and reaches the charming city of Florence, where her beauty casts a binding spell on everyone who glances at her. And as you might have guessed by now, by virtue of that gift, she is named as the enchantress of Florence.

Surprisingly