

Half the Sky: Considering the Audience-conscious Persuasive Genius of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

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A Confession

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's *Half the Sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide* considers the entrenched causes and brutal effects of gender oppression throughout the developing world. Employing elegantly simple, audience-conscious strategies, the authors implore readers to act toward emancipating women from sexual slavery, gender-based violence, and maternal mortality "by unlocking women's power as economic catalysts" (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, xxii). I attend to their persuasive strategies, but first, to contextualize my response to this text, I must make a confession . . .

I did not expect to like this book. Perhaps this is not a conventional foundation for such an essay, but it is important to note my skepticism for popular accounts of intricate, globally entrenched problems. To appeal to popular audiences, presumably unfamiliar with the issues at hand, authors must relate problems in a way simple enough to hold audience attention, recognizable enough to invoke empathy, and exciting enough to motivate action. Through simplified narratives, authors selectively emphasize that which resonates with an intended audience, while downplaying elements that might challenge that audience's moral universe. Although these watered-down accounts may raise public awareness to important global concerns, this attention comes at a cost. Reducing complex injustices to easily-grasped causes and uncomplicated solutions means sacrificing contextual and cultural nuance for explanations that neither challenge audiences' naturalized assumptions about the current world-order, nor question the implications of their place within this status quo. As a result, well-intended aid programs often fail to consider the norms, needs, and realities of affected populations on their own cultural terms.

I confess my pre-existing skepticism for two reasons. First, as a critical scholar with a decade of field experience within post-conflict grass-roots women's organizations, I have come to understand that working toward global gender justice necessitates a range of complex considerations. More poignantly humbling, I have witnessed the erosion of good-will resulting from development/aid projects that fail to appropriately consider the needs of the populations they seek to serve. Hence, before even opening Kristof and WuDunn's book, my distaste for the standard conventions of such accounts already biased my reading. The book's ancillary promotional materials – a torrent of exalted praise from journalists and "causey" celebs like George Clooney, Angelina Jolie and Oprah Winfrey – only intensified my cynicism. Hence,

Kristof and WuDunn had to overcome a somewhat unfair *a priori* credibility deficit in this reader. Yet, surprisingly, their book did just that.

Although I am wary of the ways their discourse privileges a Western “development” paradigm (with all of the elements of American-capitalist mythos that this implies), in consciously appealing to their intended audience while maintaining focus on multifaceted elements of their subject, Kristof and WuDunn demonstrate rhetorically astute political agency. While, to some extent, the text exhibits the selective attention concerns mentioned above, the authors’ treatment is largely nuanced, yet intelligible and inspirational to popular audiences. Kristof and WuDunn’s intricate strategic packaging deserves attention. A critical consideration of their persuasive strategies and rhetorical choices can offer insight into the worldview of their intended audience, and may reflect something deeper about American public thought. Moreover, in positing the deliberate nature of their choices, I speculate Kristof and WuDunn’s cognizance of the ways their own cultural assumptions influence their interpretations of the problems addressed. The extent to which their choices are part of a conscious audience-centered strategy ultimately suggests the degree to which they are skilled (even genius) political agents of social change. To this end, though a thorough rhetorical analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, I illuminate the authors’ persuasive strategies, and consider their more striking rhetorical choices.

A Skillfully Persuasive Consideration of Audience

To motivate readers to act toward alleviating global gender oppression’s most egregious brutalities, Kristof and WuDunn make use of classic elements of persuasion. Exhibiting the three Aristotelian proofs - *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* – their argument structure adheres to Monroe’s Motivated Sequence (Attention–Need–Satisfaction–Visualization–Action). Deriving initial credibility from their status as Pulitzer Prize-winning international journalists (*ethos*), Kristof and WuDunn grab audience attention with the story of a Cambodian girl’s cruel sexual enslavement. They then demonstrate this story’s emblematic relationship to the book’s broader subject, elaborating gender oppression’s brutal consequences for those women most affected. After illustrating a web of causes, they illuminate the benefits of a range of solutions, and conclude with an expedient call to action that provides immediate ways to get involved. Throughout the text, they use empirical data and rational appeals (*logos*), as well as an array of personal narratives from affected women and inspired “outsiders” working on their behalf (*pathos*), to employ all the available means of persuasion, as Aristotle advocates. Yet, even as classic persuasive strategies provide Kristof and WuDunn’s foundation, this alone does not explain the effectiveness of their appeals.

Audiences are not blank slates, nor do rhetors formulate arguments in a vacuum. Individuals enter into a given rhetorical situation with established values, beliefs, and assumptions – some of which they are aware of, while others are uninterrogated. Bringing an audience to a point of communion, and ultimately inspiring action, requires a rhetor to mindfully mold assertions and evidence to the worldview of the target audience – choosing from all possibilities those elements

most likely to move that audience. While meticulous arguments diligently supported by unimpeachable data may be most persuasive to an elite/expert audience, broader popular appeals must be carefully swathed in apparent and uninterrogated assumptions common to the largest potential audience base. As rhetorician and literary theorist Kenneth Burke suggests, persuasion relies upon (and is even synonymous with) identification – a sense of shared substance (“consubstantiality”) between rhetor and audience. Burke notes, “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (Burke 1969, 55). Hence, to move an audience to action, appeals should be rooted in experiences, beliefs and values that the audience recognizes as consistent with their own. An audience should both see itself reflected in the rhetor, and its interests reflected in the argument. This implies not so much a top-down model of persuasion, but instead more of a collaborative relationship between rhetor and audience. Keeping this in mind helps illuminate Kristof and WuDunn’s strategic efficacy in employing Aristotle’s three proofs, beginning with *ethos*.

Ethos speaks to the persuasive force that comes from the extent to which an audience deems a speaker to be credible, trustworthy, and to have the audience’s best interest in mind. Given that Kristof and WuDunn are Pulitzer Prize-winning international journalists, they bring an initial air of trustworthiness to this rhetorical situation. Boosting their credibility, they are recognized contributors to mainstream public discourse, and they are American. That is to say, their status as, at once, impressive public figures with left-centrist views (clearly within the hegemonic confines of acceptable discourse), and constitutive members of “The American People” (one of “us”), innately enhances their *ethos*. To establish their credibility to speak to this particular subject, Kristof and WuDunn bring their extensive fieldwork to bear upon many of the book’s supporting testimonies. Yet, the authors do not stop there. In a particularly astute move, as they elaborate the abject harm that global gender oppression writes on the bodies of women and girls, Kristof and WuDunn indicate that neither the problems they address nor the solutions they advocate are the domain of one pole of American political ideology.

Perhaps anticipating critiques both from the political left and right, the authors judiciously note the contributions and shortcomings of development/aid programs rooted in each side’s ideologies. They further elaborate the (often unforeseen) ways that American political discourse, and its ensuing domestic and international policies, impact international development. Moreover, the authors admonish, early and often, the pedantic bickering and polemic politics that obfuscate common goals and obstruct the emergence of effective comprehensive programs. In explaining how the polarizing agendas of political elites impede efforts to alleviate (and even exacerbate) the suffering of so many of the world’s women, the authors at once assuage the guilt of individual Americans and create a common base of operation for a politically diverse audience. In this way, the authors speak to a larger potential audience, demonstrate good-will toward that audience, and create a broad field of consubstantiality from which they advance their arguments. From there, another persuasive method that Kristof and WuDunn employ relies upon rational appeals reinforced with empirical data.

From early in the text, as they elaborate the problem of sexual enslavement, its root causes, and the many factors that keep human trafficking a thriving global industry, Kristof and WuDunn offer a host of empirical evidence gleaned from NGOs, international aid organizations, the UN, and occasionally from scholarly studies. Yet, in a somewhat revealing move, the authors do not explicitly cite these studies. In fact, the actual source is often referenced only vaguely – “an obscure but meticulous study” or “social psychologists argue,” for example (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, xiv, 100). While a “Notes” appendix citing the referenced studies follows the final chapter, within the text itself there is no indication of where these citations are located. As a scholar, this strategy frustrated me. I wanted to be able consider the source and year of a study, its methodology, its funders, etc., as I was reading about it – in its context. And yet, for a “lay” audience, this was an excellent choice. The mere allusion to empirical data carries an air of scientific authority, lending *gravitas* without the mental clutter of citation details. Had the authors left out this kind of data, audiences may have been less apt buy-into their arguments. At the same time, as bell hooks (hooks 1981) suggests, the use of research-oriented footnotes can intimidate a lay audience who may perceive such a book as being too academic – “not for common folks.” Hence, the choice to include such data without explicit source citations affords audience-appropriate legitimacy to their claims. Even so, without the narratives in which Kristof and WuDunn embed this data, their claims would be meaningless, even to their target audience. Narratives provide an interpretive frame through which an audience can make sense of facts and data. Within Kristof and WuDunn’s narrative frames lie their most strategic emotional appeals.

Though Aristotle privileges appeals to *logos*, no act of persuasion is complete without *pathos*. Burke’s ideas also find traction here, as, in its potential to foster consubstantiality by stirring audience sympathies and imagination, narrative is the most effective vehicle for *pathos*. Emotions are far more malleable than reason or credibility. Invoke your audience’s emotions – get them to care about something by getting them to care about someone. Kristof and WuDunn masterfully employ this principle by highlighting intensely personal stories. Some of these introduce the audience to women who have “risen above” unimaginable hardship, while others feature women irretrievably enveloped by their circumstances. There are also stories about Westerners – mostly American – who have taken it upon themselves to foster change. Throughout the text, narrative is an explicit medium for identification. Hence, I give most attention to Kristof and WuDunn’s rhetorical appeals to *pathos*.

Kristof and WuDunn’s explicit incorporation of individual stories to interpret “faceless” facts and data indicates their cognizance of the power an individualist focus in persuading Americans to act. In fact, the authors claim that “social psychologists” (though they do not say who, when, or in what context) have found that we are far more likely to be moved on behalf of an individual in peril than on behalf of an imperiled group – even if there is overwhelming evidence of atrocities against that group, and even if an individual is far away and unfamiliar (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 100). We are even more moved to empathy by the plight of an individual that is somehow “like us.” Hence, in each narrative, Kristof and WuDunn create opportunities for consubstantiality between the narrative subject and the reader – “a typical bubbly teenager” who

flirts and gossips, a “middle-class woman” who wears blue jeans, or a mother’s devotion to her child. At the same time, each narrative subject embodies characteristics and values that are revered within American culture. While perhaps suggestive of some aspects of the authors’ worldview, these choices certainly provide a revealing glimpse into the worldview of their audience.

Burke suggests that “every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (Burke 1945, 70). In his discussion of “terministic screens” he elaborates on this, stating that “any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality, and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (Burke 1966, 45). In essence, the way a story is told – its narrative arc, the heroes, victims and villains, even its descriptive adjectives – suggest both that narrative’s reflective and productive potential. These choices act as interpretive screens that filter facts to shape audience perceptions. At the same time, the most successful narratives – overtly fictional or otherwise – resonate with an audience because they reflect commonly held values, assumptions, and cultural truths. As a highly individualistic culture that reveres determination, perseverance against great odds, self-reliance and the pursuit of progress, narratives reflecting these qualities resonate particularly strongly with American audiences. Similarly, audiences feel less connected to characters with unfamiliar customs, and culturally unrecognizable values. Attention to a narrative’s terministic screens can hint at both a target audience’s pre-existing assumptions and a rhetor’s persuasive motives.

Part 3: Looking Through Terministic Screens

Kristof and WuDunn’s recurring narrative choices indicate certain embedded assumptions. Their terministic screens inherently privilege Western superiority, unquestioningly glorify competitive capitalism, and continue the American myth of progress as a supreme force for global good. Perhaps this also explains the authors’ repeated frustrating emphasis upon an individual’s “primitive” life of “squalor,” and the “shack” or “hovel” in which she lives. In stressing an individual’s determination to persevere against all odds – to overcome adversity in the pursuit of progress – the authors invoke audience identification. Yet, these descriptive adjectives also indicate the audience’s (and perhaps the authors’) assumption of the cultural superiority of the “civilized” West. Kristof and WuDunn do not challenge this assumption, abstaining from a corresponding consideration of the mechanisms by which the unjust distribution of global wealth was accomplished and maintained, thereby forgoing the opportunity to invite their audience to consider that it is precisely that wealth – and the subsequent lack of competition for life-sustaining resources – that affords Western cultures such “civilization.” I daresay we do not have to look far to see the thin line separating our Western “civilization” from *Lord of the Flies*.

Moreover, in what may be a hint to their own views as much to their strategic persuasive choices, Kristof and WuDunn stress that the West, specifically Americans, are not to blame for the proliferation of gendered brutalities like human trafficking. And yet, they stress that these problems cannot be overcome without our contributions. I am conflicted as to how to interpret

these assertions. In some ways it is a keen choice. It trades discussions of Western complicity and culpability for appeals to the professed American dedication to the value of each individual human life, essentially assuming both Western moral superiority and, by extension, an obligation to live up to these ostensible American values by acting to save “less civilized” peoples from themselves. At the same time, it seems crucial to their cause to consider the ways that naturalized normative Western (and particularly American) excess contributes to global economic inequities. This omission borders particularly dangerous territory when, in speaking of curbing birthrates in the developing world, the authors cite “some evidence” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 135) suggesting the male biological imperative to hyper-reproduce. Though compellingly argued, this may also imply that the “less civilized them” are closer to their animal selves than the “more civilized us.”

Still, these (limited and limiting) narratives, and the American myths to which they nod, remain effective rhetorical choices. By imbuing these narratives with allusions to American values, beliefs, and assumptions, even at the expense of complex views of the cultural “other” on their own terms, audiences can identify with the characters without having to interrogate Western cultural complicity in global injustice at large, or vis-à-vis their own standpoint. Further, in repeatedly highlighting elements of individual narratives that reflect consubstantiality between the reader and the body in peril, the authors create a climate for reader empathy and action, even if it is rooted in a disingenuous field of consubstantiality. These strategies are not only evident in the narratives of effected women, but are also crucial to the narratives of those individuals who have taken action on behalf of affected women.

Take the story of twelve-year-old Zach from Georgia (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 54). Upon learning about modern human trafficking, Zach began a campaign to raise awareness and collect donations on behalf of affected women. Zach is a “social entrepreneur” (a term that itself resonates with American capitalist values) who used good ol’ American determination to make a difference – and by extension, so can you! Zach’s story is entrenched in the recurring theme of the ultimate universal correctness of American capitalist values. It also demonstrates another narrative strategy tailored to the book’s intended audience – associating the struggle to end global gender oppression with the American struggle for racial equality. This connection implies a transhistoric imperative to act toward ending the brutalities of gender oppression by creating a seamless teleological narrative that extends from the early abolitionist movement to the US Civil Rights Movement. The authors link this modern struggle to a past that, while contentious in its day, is now sanitized in popular discourse to appear as the inevitable result of Western civilization’s eternal march toward progress. Zach, as his story suggests, was moved to action precisely because he connected modern human trafficking with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The chapter where we find Zach’s story, aptly called “The New Abolitionists,” is neither the first nor last time this connection appears. Parallels between American progress toward racial equality and the imperative to act against gender oppression resurface repeatedly. Early on, to demonstrate why the reader should care about something that, while certainly regrettable, is happening far away to someone else, and in any event seems beyond our control, the authors

highlight the activism of early British abolitionists. The authors then link the imperative to act toward progress with American self-reliant perseverance, suggesting that this book “is not a drama of victimization, but of empowerment” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, xxii).

Adding weight to the book’s dominant themes, some significant sub-currents undulate throughout, one of which manifests as a bias against intellectualism and academic thought. Kristof and WuDunn frequently question the usefulness and applicability of the scholarly studies they reference, which, as previously mentioned, they do not cite in an intellectually useful way. Further, the authors dismiss academic contributions to understanding global gender injustice as an “ivory tower” waste of time, and criticize scholarly debates about human rights issues and academic attention to gender-sensitive legal reforms for their limited impacts. Also exemplified in narrative form, this sub-current manifests in the authors’ telling of Sunitha’s story – a “middle class” activist from India with a graduate degree in social work. The authors describe with astonishment Sunitha’s “polished upper-class [. . .] English” which sounds “more like a university professor than an activist” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 57). What exactly does this mean? Given that English is the language of instruction in India – from primary school to the university – why is it shocking that an Indian would speak polished English, let alone an Indian woman with a graduate degree? And more to the point, why do they assume that scholars and activists are mutually exclusive categories? While both the dismissal of academic contributions and descriptions of Sunitha clearly serve the wider purpose of solidifying identification with popular audiences, this strategy is disquieting, particularly given the broad, multi-level education projects that form the backbone of their solution.

This anti-intellectual undercurrent is further apparent in Kristof and WuDunn’s dismissive attitude and homogenized treatment of “feminism.” While their critique of the short-comings of the American “second wave” is spot-on in many regards, in failing to also account for second wave feminists’ contributions to Western gender consciousness and to gender equality under the law, their critique seems to equate to little more than pandering to the negative connotations of “feminism” lingering in the common American lexicon. While Western feminist consciousness is their main target, they also diminish global feminist contributions. Their flippant homogenization of feminism is made even more unsettling by the frequency with which the authors misappropriate the term “patriarchal societies” to refer to places where violent gender oppression is the normative default. What society on earth is not literally patriarchal, though admittedly each to a different extent and degree? This fallacious characterization of patriarchy further ingrains the “civilized us” versus “uncivilized them” paradigm. In fact, the two go hand-in-hand, in some ways also reflecting similarities with their characterization of the American struggle for racial equality. Essentially, “we” are gender-sensitive (and racially sensitive), not because feminists fought for gender equity, social consciousness and legal inclusion, sometimes at great peril and dear cost to themselves, but because “we” are civilized, and gender equity (like racial equity) was the natural progression of civilization. It follows, then, that gender (and racial) oppression is no longer an issue for the civilized “us.” By extension, gender oppression still exists in places where “they” are “less civilized,” precisely *because* “they” are “less civilized.”

More urgently, with this sweeping dismissal Kristof and WuDunn miss an opportunity to highlight how entrenched attitudes worldwide contribute to the specific gendered violence that the authors seek to mitigate. This is exemplified through Zoya's narrative – a 21 year-old “middle-class” Afghani woman, who, in “wearing blue-jeans [. . .] looked more like an American than an Afghan” (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 68). The authors call attention to Zoya's assertion that it is appropriate to beat one's wife when she is disobedient (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 69). Their image of Zoya at once allows the audience to identify with her (middle-class, in jeans), while stressing that in “less civilized,” “patriarchal cultures,” women are often complicit in their own subjugation. Yet, this ignores ways that the global condition of womanhood manifests through the gender-disproportionate violence women continue to endure in our own country and throughout the Western world – where, incidentally, women are also still frequently complicit in their own subjugation.

Kristof and WuDunn forego another golden opportunity to complicate overly-simplified “us” versus “them” paradigms by all-but-ignoring the treatment of women during the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia, a fully developed, relatively wealthy, highly gender-conscious society prior to the wars. The vicious use of war rape in Bosnia, which arguably received extensive attention precisely because it took place in “civilized” Europe, raised global awareness of the prevalence of sexual violence against women in war, and helped birth the legal precedent for prosecuting war rape as a crime against the violated woman. Although military codes have prohibited war rape since the late twelfth century, war rape has most frequently been treated as a shameful but unavoidable consequence (the body of woman as a victor's spoil). On the rare occasions war rape was prosecuted, it was treated as a property crime against the man to whom the violated woman “belonged,” or a crime against the honor of her family or community. Kristof and WuDunn could have elaborated the Bosnian case as an example of how, even in “civilized societies,” the vilest face of gender inequity can come to bear on the bodies of women. They could have challenged the myth of inevitable progress toward gender equity in “civilized” societies, and elaborated the globally entrenched nature of gender oppression by demonstrating that even under international law, the conception of women as fully human is less than a decade old. Unfortunately, Kristof and WuDunn's lack of attention to the latent potential the Bosnian case presents for more sophisticated understandings of the truly global nature of gender oppression also represents a missed opportunity to reverse the noble “us” versus the savage “them” paradigm that is overrepresented in this text.

Still, even given that their rhetorical choices rely on artificial notions of Western gender equity, and advance unquestioned assumptions of Western cultural superiority, I cannot conclude that this is actually suggestive of Kristof and WuDunn's worldview. In fact, several factors are more indicative of a conscious rhetorical choice to identify with a broader popular audience amidst the current American climate of intellectual demonization. It would be easy to dismiss Kristof and WuDunn as unconscious henchmen of the status quo were it not for their careful elaboration of these elements. Their nuanced advocacy of a multi-layered education solution, their attention to the importance of empowering people to engage locally resonant programs and

projects that respond to local needs, and their clear admonishment of a “silver bullet” solution – a reality-check that real change is slow, riddled with set-backs, and requires hard work and sustained dedication – all suggest something more complicated at work. These elements represent the strongest evidence that some of their more critically questionable rhetorical choices are, in fact, part of a larger, audience-centered strategy. I conclude this essay by treating each of these briefly.

Conclusions?

Kristof and WuDunn see education as of primary importance at every level. They do not advocate a homogeneous approach with “enlightened” Westerners building schools to educate the “less civilized.” In fact, the authors note serious drawbacks to a top-down approach to education, which fails to consider the most immediate needs of local populations. (Building new schools is useless if those they seek to empower cannot access them.) The authors stress that to alleviate gender brutalities, it is essential to change the entrenched systems and cultural realities that continue to drive them. In this sense, Kristof and WuDunn stress that while working toward legal reform is relevant, it does not affect the attitudinal changes necessary to shift local realities. People’s life choices are limited by the options they recognize as available. Working with local organizations to develop locally viable educational opportunities for girls (and women) is key to affecting change upon oppressive realities. Kristof and WuDunn offer ample evidence to suggest that, for many of those most brutally oppressed, education can translate into empowerment and choice. But, international aid/development projects must take a comprehensive, micro-level, heterogeneous approach, attending to local material needs and cultural realities. As such, another key to increasingly effective educational opportunities is balancing the Western drive to “help” or “save” these women with a nuanced understanding of their cultural norms, needs, and constraints.

Kristof and WuDunn also advocate greater attention to international education/awareness in the United States, suggesting less ethnocentric American curricula and increased study abroad-opportunities for students. American students need to develop greater global consciousness. This begins with curricular reform. Further, the kind of self- and global awareness that living abroad affords is crucial to helping American students (who will later become the nation’s decision-makers) understand the global impacts of their individual consumptive and broader political choices. This kind of “hands-on” field experience is more effective in the long term than throwing money at a problem from the safety of our living rooms. The authors illustrate this through the story of Harper, an American girl from the mid-west volunteering in Eastern Congo. Certainly, elements of Harper’s narrative pander to the materialistic sensibilities of Kristof and WuDunn’s target audience. We are told that Harper misses shopping at the mall and having a fast internet connection. She bemoans Eastern Congo’s paltry dating scene and extols being exalted as “queen” to the locals. Yet, the consubstantiality these narrative elements create is important. Like Zach, Harper is a “typical” American teen whose individual efforts have affected

change in individual lives, and through this, her own life has been transformed. The underlying message: If she can do it, so can you! In fact, Kristof and WuDunn suggest that without the individual participation of “normal” Americans, the necessary changes will never be realized, as existing aid organizations suffer themselves from a host of entrenched problems impeding their effectiveness.

This is another point where Kristof and WuDunn are exceptionally strong. While not denigrating the efforts and intentions of aid organizations, they offer several important critiques of dominant development/aid models. One issue is that aid organizations often do not conduct rigorous research on the effectiveness of their own programs for fear that calling their practices into question may jeopardize funding (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 17). Another concern is that an old-fashioned paternalistic paradigm underscores many international aid projects, a “we know what is best for you” model for which Kristof and WuDunn offer excellent examples. A third concern is that many of the most financially secure aid organizations (as well as cause-driven celebrities) prefer high-profile projects in urban areas where they will receive maximum exposure. In fact, the most intense need is far away from urban centers, and high-visibility often comes at the expense of smaller projects that can empower a greater number of people, often among the most impoverished and needy. A significant portion of aid money is misspent, even wasted, on flashy projects, while more pressing, less expensive, but less glamorous needs go unmet. Further, Kristof and WuDunn stress that big funders ignore some of the most critical problems because their complicated solutions are neither cheap nor sexy. For example, the infinitely pressing need to attend to maternal health is a project which is neither cost-effective nor at the top of anyone’s agenda (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 121). Yet, the simplest maternal health standards that we take for granted are not even an option for many of the world’s women.

As they conclude, Kristof and WuDunn offer a sobering reality-check, asking audiences to bear in mind that there is no “silver bullet” solution to gender oppression. Change is slow, and even with assistance, individuals sometimes fail. After predicating the bulk of their appeal on narratives that invoke a sense of individual obligation to each individual human life, Kristof and WuDunn offer a quiet reminder. The issues they seek to mitigate are not really about the success or failure of one person, nor do they hinge on the inevitable march toward progress, one person at a time. Instead, real change is more a process than an event, a societal dance of sorts – two steps forward, one step back – requiring complex, multi-pronged approaches and heterogeneous projects over a sustained period of time. Further, just as the societies in need are made up of collections of individuals, so too are the audiences to which our authors appeal. As such, Kristof and WuDunn conclude with a simple call to action that offers four ways that every individual can take part in the solution in the next ten minutes, providing the audience with the kind of hope characteristic of conclusions to classic American stories.

In all, while I am clearly not *Half the Sky’s* target audience, Kristof and WuDunn’s skillful audience-centered approach to this complicated problem is praiseworthy. Their employment of classic persuasive strategies and adroit rhetorical choices reflect a keen consideration of audience. The extent to which their choices are fully conscious is a matter of speculation, and a

thorough analysis to this end is outside the scope of this essay. Instead, I have posited the extent to which Kristof and WuDunn are astute persuasive agents – consciously crafting consubstantiality with their intended audience versus the extent to which their rhetorical choices reveal something about their own uninterrogated assumptions. I do not presume to have these answers – though I would suggest that the extent to which their choices are conscious indicates where these authors (and others like them) fall on the continuum between persuasive strategists and all-out political geniuses.

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