

Excerpted from **Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide** by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. Copyright © 2009 by Nicholas D. Kristof. Excerpted by permission of Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

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 bused, 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 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.

PHENOMENAL WOMAN

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Maya Angelou has had a varied career as a streetcar conductor in San Francisco, a dancer, editor for *The Arab Observer*, teacher, and

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BY MAYA ANGELOU

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say,
It's in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them,
They say they still can't see.
I say,
It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.

I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.