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## From Outrage to Action

Henry Krisch

*University of Connecticut*

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## From Outrage to Action

### Abstract

Kristof and WuDunn provide a vivid panoramic view of problems faced by women (primarily in the “developing” world), what has been done and what more could be done to help them achieve dignity and autonomy in their lives, and how vindication of their rights could contribute to the broader social development of their societies. In this they provide us with important insights into how human rights might be effectively proclaimed and successfully implemented. In reviewing their considerable contributions, I shall also suggest some limitations on both their analysis and their policy recommendations.

### Keywords

Human rights, Women's rights, Political rights, Socioeconomic rights

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## From Outrage to Action

by Henry Krisch

Kristof and WuDunn provide a vivid panoramic view of problems faced by women (primarily in the “developing” world), what has been done and what more could be done to help them achieve dignity and autonomy in their lives, and how vindication of their rights could contribute to the broader social development of their societies. In this they provide us with important insights into how human rights might be effectively proclaimed and successfully implemented. In reviewing their considerable contributions, I shall also suggest some limitations on both their analysis and their policy recommendations.

First, as suggested above, they properly link such human rights concerns as lack of simple justice in the face of horrifying brutality with wider concerns of economic, social and cultural development. They demonstrate the importance of active media concern in raising such issues to a level of effective public concern. Furthermore, they detail the efforts of “interveners,” sometimes locals, often NGO outsiders, in seeding the social landscape with hopeful sprouts of change. The authors themselves provide a short list of relatively inexpensive but potentially life changing steps that could be undertaken. Their account, surprisingly so in the face of the misery and brutality they have witnessed, is a hopeful call to energetic action. One wants to cheer them on and, with some cautions in mind, one should.

The authors’ linking of traditional political human rights with economic and social issues reflects a healthy intellectual trend in the study of human rights and moves us away from sterile debates as to the relative importance of political versus socioeconomic rights. Economic advancement empowers people, especially women, in ways that lead to greater political efficacy; both these gains help individuals (again, especially women) escape a restrictive and sometimes degrading social environment.

Good enough: who would object to keeping girls in school by helping them manage menstruation, or to subsidizing salt iodization? But the limitations of this neo-modernization analysis are evident if we automatically expect improvements in the status of women because of growing economic power and a general rise in the prosperity of their societies. In our Western world—prosperous, democratic, and seemingly devoted to gender equity—women often find meaningful advancement at home and at work politically and socially difficult.

This article contributes to the analysis of the media’s role in turning denial of human rights into a public issue. Kristof and WuDunn are refreshingly candid about their own slow awakening as to what constitutes “news”; they have made women’s concerns more visible and politically relevant. If, as they write, “In this century... the brutality inflicted on so many women and girls around the globe...” will become a major issue, their own work will help make it so. Here it is important to bear in mind the “Cassandra effect.” Surely it is better to bring abuses to light than not, yet crimes in Bosnia or Rwanda, or the current Indian “bride burning,” were not exactly secret. Will today’s Cassandras move political leaders to greater effect than in Troy? That would require a change in the political calculations of political elites; the gradual percolation of human rights ideas into political and scholarly discourse may help. The Obama administration’s actions thus far seem positive, but it is still early in the game. (Recall that the US government has had an

Assistant Secretary of State dealing with human rights issues since the Carter administration.) It is not a hopeful sign that so much of the progress Kristof and WuDunn detail is the work of NGOs rather than of governments.

It is precisely this question of political will for large-scale, transnational political action that haunts this hopeful article. We read of a handful of remarkable women who, with timely outside help, have broken free from deprivation and humiliation. Are these exemplary stories misleading? Is not the great mass of women excluded from the help a few women received? Are they (like most people everywhere) lacking in the extraordinary strength of will and character they displayed? As Kristof and WuDunn's data (readily available to anyone wishing to act) shows, there are millions yet in chains for the few who have fought their way free.

Kristof and WuDunn have service in placing the conditions of women at the center of our concerns and have thereby enriched human rights analysis. But caution is in order. The resistance of political authority, economic privilege and gender-based power and customs will be difficult to overcome. Long term gains will require immediate political costs. Who will pay them? What strategies will provide economic and political tools on a large scale? What ideas will reconcile emerging women's rights with embedded patriarchic privilege?

The authors' often heroic personal involvement in their reporting—who will have forgotten the video on the *New York Times* web site of Kristof pounding on the door of a Pakistani brothel?—has yet not had large scale results in terms of changed policies. To be fair, the authors do not claim such achievements, but the lack of effect on the authorities, especially local police, shows the limitations of even the most provocative journalism. Kristof and WuDunn might reply that working with women will affect changes from below that will change attitudes in communities otherwise resistant to change in mores decreed from a distant capital. Fair enough— but slow work.

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**Professor Henry Krisch** (*Political Science emeritus, University of Connecticut*) taught political science at the University of Connecticut and Columbia University for almost forty years. He has specialized in Soviet and German, especially East German, politics, and more recently in international human rights issues. At the University of Connecticut, Krisch was Director of the Center for Soviet and East European Studies, co-chaired the academic program committee for the Dodd Year (1995-96) on "Fifty Years After Nuremberg: Human Rights and the Rule of Law." Since 1999, he has been a member of the Gladstein Human Rights Committee. His publications include *German Politics under Soviet Occupation* (1974), *The German Democratic Republic: Search for Identity* (1985), *Politics and Culture in the GDR* (1989), *Politics in Germany* [co-authored] (2009), and "George Soros," in *The Encyclopedia of Human Rights* (2009).