

Pulitzer-Prize winning columnist campaigns to help the oppressed

“Between 60 and 100 million women are missing from the world,” Nicholas Kristof said during his speech at the Palladium Theater on April 6. He urged his audience to make a difference.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for The New York Times, Kristof based his speech on his latest book, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. It addresses the plight of women in developing countries. The speech was part of the Florida Holocaust Museum’s Genocide and Human Rights Awareness Month.

“In the last 50 years, more women and girls were discriminated against to death than all the men who died in all the battles of the 20th century,” Kristof said.

He called gender inequality the central moral issue of the 21st century.

“Women and girls aren’t the problem,” Kristof said. “They are the solution.” He told listeners that educating girls can help global problems like poverty and overpopulation.

Old and young packed the theater. They came from all walks of life. One audience member had escaped Nazi persecution during World War II by living in the Shanghai Ghetto. Others were children of Holocaust survivors. Some were high school teachers who used *Half the Sky* in their curriculum.

Cheers and applause greeted Kristof as he walked on stage.

Kristof kept his speech personal. It felt less like a lecture and more like a conversation, filled with compelling stories about women around the world.

His stories took listeners to the red-light district in Cambodia, where kidnapped teenage girls are enslaved in brothels. Their only hope of freedom?

“They get out by getting AIDS,” Kristof said.

Human trafficking “truly is modern slavery,” he said. To give his listeners perspective, Kristof compared it to slavery in the 1780s. Every year, 80,000 African slaves were shipped to the New World. Today, 800,000 slaves are “trafficked each year across international borders,” he said.

Kristof said he felt “exploitative” when he interviewed two teenage slaves in Cambodia.

“I walked out of the brothel knowing I had a front page story, and these two girls would end up dying of AIDS,” he said.

He returned to find them dead.

The next time he profiled two Cambodian slaves, he chose an unorthodox method of freeing them.

“David, do we have a policy on buying human beings?” he asked the lawyer for The New York Times. The audience roared with laughter.

“Turns out we didn’t,” he said, continuing the joke. “We probably do now.”

For under \$400, he bought Srey Neth and Srey Mom from a life of prostitution. “I got receipts,” he said.

Uncertain laughter rippled through the audience.

“When you get a receipt for buying a human being, that should be a shame on the global conscience,” Kristof said. His listeners fell silent.

Human trafficking isn’t the only threat to women. About 500,000 women die every year in childbirth. Those who survive often suffer internal injuries. They are shunned by society.

Starvation also threatens. It’s a common practice among poor families: feed the sons, starve the daughters. Kristof showed a photograph of a starving Ethiopian girl at an emergency feeding center. All her bones were visible. Her brothers? “Doing fine,” Kristof said. Her fellow patients? All girls.

Many girls in developing countries are never given the opportunity to attend school. Yet educated women can be a valuable member of the labor force. Kristof called them “squandered resources.”

Kristof offered practical methods for helping girls. He suggested giving female students personal hygiene products. Girls often miss school during menstruation and fall behind. They eventually drop out.

He admitted that we cannot eliminate world hunger or illiteracy. “But we can support a particular third grade classroom in a particular refugee camp,” he said. “For them, it is transformative.”

Too often, the plight of girls in developing countries is overlooked by the media. “What we’re worst at covering is what happens every day,” Kristof said.

When millions of women go missing every year, the tragedy becomes routine.

Mary Johnson, who has designed genocide exhibits at the Florida Holocaust Museum, called his speech “incredible.” She appreciated his desire to highlight “things that go on every day that we don’t pay attention to.”

Kristof received a standing ovation when he finished his speech.