

## Crossing Borders and Building Bridges with “Half the Sky”

by Catherine DeGaytan, Norma L. Gorham and Mark DeGaytan

*Women hold up half the sky.*

### Introduction

According to this Chinese proverb, without women, the sky will fall down. Based on the fact that women are crucial for society and the idea that women are not the problem but the solution for certain social issues, Nicholas D. Kristof, a *New York Times* journalist, and Sheryl WuDunn, his wife, spent years traveling to different countries around the world talking with women to hear their stories of oppression firsthand and talking with people who are trying to help them. The result of their travels and inspirational interviews is the best-selling book entitled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (2009).

### Half the Sky Documentary

The PBS documentary mini-series of the same title (2012) makes viewers aware of social issues affecting women in six different countries and teaches the importance of social responsibility to implement changes for the better. Classroom module videos that we adapted from the documentary are the springboard for engaging, collaborative activities that help advanced ESL students improve their listening and speaking skills while learning about women’s social issues. Pairs (or groups) of students are assigned one video, focusing on one social issue in a country and featuring one female celebrity activist. They then become the “experts” on that issue, not only by watching the video and learning key vocabulary but also by doing additional research on the issue in the country assigned to them.

### Six Women’s Issues, Six Celebrity Activists

Following are the six women’s issues with the featured celebrity activists in parentheses:

- Gender-based violence in Sierra Leone (Eva Mendes)
- Sex trafficking in Cambodia (Meg Ryan)
- Economic empowerment in Kenya (Olivia Wilde)
- Maternal mortality in Somaliland (Diane Lane)
- Education in Vietnam (Gabrielle Union)
- Prostitution in India (America Ferrara)

The culminating activity of the *Half the Sky* project is an interactive poster session to teach Americans and ESL students from other invited classes about the women’s issues in the six countries and the importance of social responsibility.

### Class Background Information

ESL students in an advanced Listening / Speaking class at a university intensive English program participated in the *Half the Sky* project. There were 15 students in the class (5 females and 10 males) from 6 countries (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Japan and Mexico).

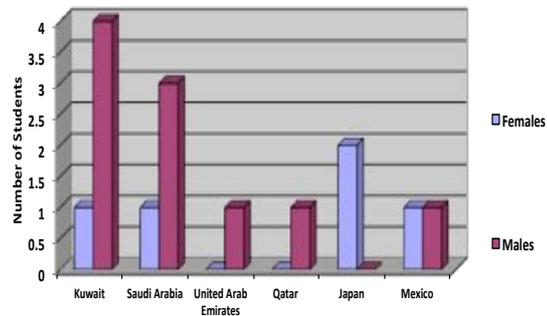


Figure 1: Class composition.

The class met seven and a half hours per week (six 75-minute periods) in an eight-week course. The six steps below were followed in the *Half the Sky* project. The project required five class periods in addition to time outside of the class for students to collaborate with partners.

### Step 1: Introduction to the Half the Sky Project

Before introducing the project, students answer the question—What does social responsibility mean to you?—in an audio recording during the first week of class. It is important for the students to have a couple of weeks to build a strong rapport before beginning the project because of its sensitive issues. It is equally important for the teacher to have ample time to determine which students will work best together on which social issue and whether the students have the English ability, maturity, and collaborative skills needed for the success of the project.

In the third week of the course, students in small groups discuss the meaning of social responsibility and the Chinese proverb—*Women hold up half the sky*. After a class wrap-up, introduce the project by showing the book entitled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, giving background information about the authors and the book, and viewing the short trailer for the [PBS documentary](#) [time 2:40] with the sole listening task of noting the six women’s issues mentioned.

Elicit the social issues mentioned in the trailer and the meaning of each issue. Explain the project further, and assign an issue to a pair (or group) of students. Show the [Symbaloo webmix](#), which can be put on the learning management system for easier access, and describe how it is organized. The webmix houses six tiles, or links, for each issue: a map of the region, a map of the country, a Quizlet with key vocabulary in the *Half the Sky* classroom module video, a written summary of the video content, and an interview with the celebrity activist.



Figure 2: Symbaloo webmix.

Have pairs access the webmix on their phones or laptops to view the two maps and the Quizlet. After the pairs have completed the three pre-viewing tasks, have them watch the video (approximately 10 minutes) one time. While watching the video a second time, they should take notes on the problem (the social issue) and the solution (the organization targeting that particular social issue).

In each video, Kristof and the celebrity activist interact with women and girls and hear their stories of oppression firsthand. They also interview the people working at the organization that is trying to help these women and girls. Although the women’s social issues are critical and seem depressing, the people and

organizations determined to help the affected women and girls cast an overwhelmingly hopeful light on dark issues. While the majority of our students were shocked because they had been unaware of the existence of these serious problems, they felt that the solutions were hopeful and uplifting. We were affected by the concern and compassion that our students exhibited after watching their assigned video.

### Step 2: Research the Issue: Problem & Solution

After students have viewed the video again outside of class, check each pair’s understanding of the problem and the solution. Pairs use the other links on the Symbaloo webmix—the summary of the video and the interview with the celebrity activist—to gather more information about the problem and the solution. The teacher guides each pair in searching for additional information about the problem and/or the solution needed to become the “experts.”

For example, the teacher might suggest researching the civil war in Cambodia to have a better understanding of the problem of sex trafficking. Another suggestion might be to visit the website *Room to Read*, an organization promoting literacy for girls in Vietnam, to learn more details about the organization as well as why John Wood, its founder, left his executive position at Microsoft. Pairs are required to have at least three sources for their poster, one of which is the video.

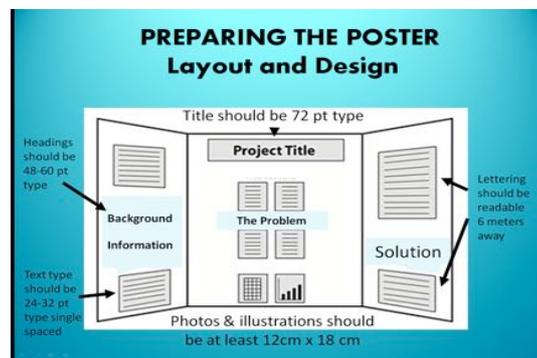


Figure 3: Poster design

### Step 3: Preparing the Poster

Show students a PowerPoint slide that gives instruction on making an effective problem/solution poster and share some sample posters. In addition, give tips on delivering an effective poster presentation. Pairs decide how they want to showcase the problem and solution and decide how to lay out the text and visuals on the tri-fold poster board. They also prepare a *Works Cited* page or *References* to be included on the poster.

#### Step 4: The Poster Session

Collect all six posters from the pairs. Set up the initial three posters, along with video cameras, in different parts of the room. Welcome the guests—Americans and ESL students from other invited classes—and explain the *Half the Sky* project and its purpose. Divide the guests so that there is a relatively equal number at each of the three posters. The time allotted for the poster session is one hour: the initial group of three posters is exhibited for 30 minutes, and then the final group of three posters is exhibited for 30 minutes.

Each pair has 10 minutes to present the information on the poster and to answer questions from the audience members. Ring a bell after 10 minutes to have the guests rotate to the next poster. Continue the same procedure for the third poster. After 30 minutes for the initial group of posters, the same procedure is followed when the final three posters are set up. Students who are not presenting and student guests take notes during the poster presentations, using a problem/solution graphic organizer.

#### Step 5: Assessment

Students watch their videotaped presentations, then complete an audio recorded self-evaluation and a written reflection. Evaluate each pair's presentation (criteria can include teamwork, the poster, language use and delivery skills/interaction with the audience.).

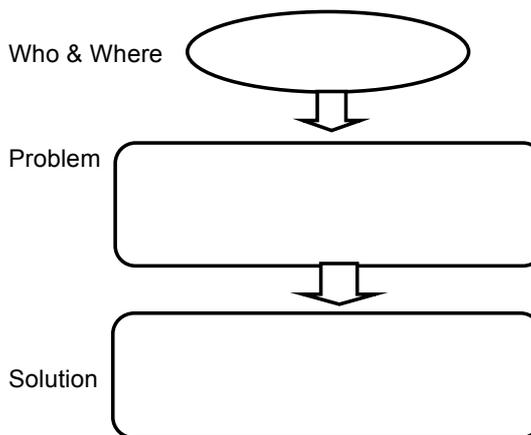
#### Step 6: Watch the Other *Half the Sky* Videos

Students access the Quizlets with key vocabulary on the *Symbaloo webmix*, and have them review their graphic organizers, which serve as scaffolding, before watching the other videos via the webmix. In class, students in small groups finish by discussing their reactions to the women's social issues and what they learned about social responsibility from the poster session and the videos.

#### Conclusion

The students' reflections on the *Half the Sky* project were overwhelmingly positive. The students enjoy using technology—the *Symbaloo webmix* and internet sites for research; collaborating with their partners; having creativity and freedom in designing their posters; improving their listening and speaking skills; and, most importantly, being the “experts” who teach others what they have learned. The trailer shown in the introduction to the project (Step 1) makes a call for action—to “engage, motivate, educate, and join the movement.” Our students did just that, making the *Half the Sky* project a huge success.

#### Problem-Solution Graphic Organizer



#### SELF-EVALUATION: *Half the Sky* Project

##### Directions:

Watch your videotaped poster presentation, and record your answers to the questions below.

##### Questions

1. What does social responsibility mean to you?
2. Do you think that the *Half the Sky* project helped you develop your teamwork skills? If so, how do you think these skills will help you in your future university classes?
3. Do you think that your speaking and listening skills improved as a result of the *Half the Sky* project? Explain with reasons and examples.

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#### References and Resources

Chermayeff, M. (Executive Producer & Director), Beardsley M., & Gordon, J. (Executive Producers). (2012). *Half the sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide* [Documentary]. U.S.: Show of Force, LLC and Fugitive Films.

Kristof, N.D., & WuDunn, S. (2009). *Half the sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide*. New York: Vintage Books.

##### On-line Resources

Half the sky [ESL Website] DeGaytan, C. (2014). [www.symbaloo.com/mix/halfthesky](http://www.symbaloo.com/mix/halfthesky)

Half the sky PBS documentary  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JbWA-6GDn4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JbWA-6GDn4)