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comment and debate

On charity and sex

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The worlds of charity and sex are diametrically opposed. One is a public activity, focused on helping people in need, altruistically giving time or money to assist others, either as an amelioration or improvement of life circumstances, or in response to an emergency. The other is usually a private activity, rooted in pleasure and stimulation, focused either on selfish gratification of (usually) just one or two people, or procreation. One is kind, the other deviant. One happens in the light and is for everyone, the other happens in the dark and is for adults only. One is virtuous, the other sinful. One is nice, the other naughty.

Of course, these are gross simplifications. The charity world is not always as nice as made out, and sex can or should be far more fun, loving, and joyous than that caricature. Both bring immense pleasure to large numbers of people every day, both may demonstrate ‘love of one’s fellow (wo)man’, and can equally provide the participants with a huge amount of joy or difficulty. Both are demonstrative of personal passions enacted in relation (usually) with or to other people.

But discursively, the two worlds are still treated as separate. The charity world, of the perfect volunteer – humble, smiling, and almost sexless in their neutrality – is frequently still conceptualised as ‘old ladies with blue rinses’, working behind curtains in charity shops, drinking endless tea (MacDonald, 1996; Davis Smith, 1999). Or the young volunteer, so willing and eager to help, a blank slate of detachment ready to do what’s needed, is often central to how the charitable sphere is marketed, leaving the field to the uncool world of “wee geeks” and “teachers’ pets” (Davies, 2018: 266), and the ‘good girls’ of charity (Patton, 1990). And the perfect sex – arousing, sometimes gentle, sometimes nasty, featuring the realities of bodies and orifices and liquids, awkwardness, and pain, and ecstasy – is very much rooted in emotion and edge (Hart, 2017). The neutral good-heartedness and wholesome innocence of the typical image of charity, for example, a child baking cakes to raise pennies for a school minibus, contrasts starkly with the unfettered debauchery, titillation and sin

conjured up by normative imaginations of sex. This dualism has its roots in religious iconography of the virgin and the whore (Wyman and Dionisopoulos, 2000), and has yet to shed these origins despite the growing secularisation of giving in Western society.

However, in the last few years several stories where sex and charity are explicitly linked, where the idea of ‘sex sells’ has become ‘sex fundraises’ or ‘sex helps’, show that charity’s fusty old image may need a rethink.

One such instance was in response to the devastation of the 2019–2020 Australian bushfire emergency, which caused anger, horror and panic around the world. Thirty-four people died, over 2,800 buildings were destroyed, and many millions of animals were affected or killed (UNEP, 2020). As with any tragic event, though, the images and stories stimulated a huge wave of kindness, including messages of sympathy and empathy, calls for quicker progress on tackling climate change, as well as large donations to Australian fire services, most of which are volunteer-run. One call for donations for the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, launched by comedian Celeste Barker, raised \$32m in just a few days (Giglielmi, 2020). Sports stars like the late cricketer Shane Warne and tennis player Ashleigh Barty also committed funds, and the issue was highly prominent at events such as the Golden Globe awards ceremony. It was estimated that over A\$500m was donated in order to alleviate the different forms of suffering caused by the fires (Chatfield, 2020).

But perhaps the most prolific fundraising effort came from American adult model Kaylen Ward who, on 4 January 2020, tweeted that she would send a nude photo of herself to anyone who sent her a Direct Message with proof they had donated \$10 to one of over a dozen fire-related causes. In her original tweet, Ward provided her followers with a list of where donations could be made, alongside a redacted nude of herself. In the few days after her original tweet, with thousands of people replying to her with proof of their donations, Ward announced that over \$1m had been donated by her followers, all of whom received an explicit, unredacted photo as a result.

Charity partially works on reward: giving to a cause can both relieve guilt but also create a fuzzy ‘warm glow’ of having done something good (Andreoni, 1990). The more market-orientated charity takes this a step further. Cause-related marketing is driven by the idea of getting something in return: ‘Buy this washing powder, and £1 from every pack goes to charity’; ‘Give money to our telethon, and you’ll get to laugh as a beloved yet acrophobic celebrity does a bungee jump’. This of course plays upon our common understanding of how the charitable gift relationship works: through some form of reciprocity (Mauss, 1970).

So perhaps it should be completely unsurprising that when there is clearly a market for images of naked people on the internet (with estimates that the global pornography industry is worth \$97bn (NBC News, 2015)), tying such demand to the charitable impulse seems obvious. The website Pornhub (2019) recently ran the ‘Dirtiest Porn Ever’ campaign, where a pornographic video was filmed on a plastic-strewn beach, where for every view the company would donate to cleaning up the oceans. Such campaigns also serve as greenwashing or reputation-laundering services for companies regularly accused of hosting materials that involve trafficking, paedophilia, or revenge porn (Dahlstrom, 2023). If mainstream companies have Corporate Social Responsibility policies and align with certain causes, why wouldn’t large adult industry companies do the same? Kaylen Ward knew – like we all do – that sex sells, but decided to take the action, and the associated risk, upon herself.

What does all this say about the relationship between charity, sex, and the mediating force of social media? There is a tendency for some researchers and

practitioners to think of charity as occurring in a vacuum, abstracted from wider social forces. But if something exists in wider society, it exists in the charity sector. The Oxfam sexual abuse (Gillespie et al, 2019) and President's Club harassment scandals, alongside Jimmy Savile's numerous crimes (Dean, 2023), showed that the #metoo conversation needed to be happening in the charity sector as well, as many female practitioners had intimated for decades. Yet because of the sector's position as 'special' and 'different', these complexities have been ignored or glossed over – that specialness often used as a mask for bullying and poor practice (Dean, 2020). So if social values change to understand that sex positivity, body positivity, and challenging traditional moral righteousness are socially important, it can be made to work for charity as well.

Many charities exist in the UK that seek to support sex workers' rights, dignity and safety, and also, in some cases, assist in access to sex workers. Some, such as Streetlight UK, work to assist sex workers in finding a pathway out of the lifestyle; others operate as radical collectives seeking to decriminalise sex work, such as SWARM (the Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement). The charity Touching Base in Australia provides services connecting people with disabilities and their carers with sex workers, providing advice on how to access the sex industry and other services. In the UK, the TLC Trust (nd) has a similar service:

run by and for people with invisible and visible disabilities. This branch of the charity focuses on the provision of sexual and intimate services that are paid for by clients to service providers. Our Mission is that disabled people can use sexual and intimate services to help them learn about physical pleasure and may enable them to move forward towards personal sexual relationships. Where this is not possible, we would like to ensure that all disabled people have access to sexual, sensual and intimate experiences.

Are such organisations doing work of special or particular interest? Or do we just associate them with the colourful pluralism of the voluntary sector? Such services are as much a part of the voluntary sector as charities in other fields, such as education, welfare provision, or social care. And they're not hidden: the TLC Trust's founder Tuppy Owens won the Innovation Award of Sexual Health and Human Rights from UNESCO in 2015 (May, 2015). But they certainly aren't at the centre of the polity's (or researchers') discussions about the voluntary sector.

These are but ruminations. Are our conceptions of the voluntary sector, or immediate thoughts or image in our heads of that phrase, actually very self-limiting? And are those of us from very comfortable and privileged backgrounds not the right people to be documenting or setting out what 'the sector' looks like? Quite possibly. Maybe in practice the sector is far sexier than we are sketching out here, but the imagery of charity as being fundamentally innocent is pervasive in wider society.

The problem is perhaps that decades of advertising and entertainment have made earnest helpfulness and kindness far less alluring than being nonchalantly non-committal. Charity is rooted in ideas of open arms and open hearts, whereas ideas about sex are generally positioned within inaccessibility, being 'hard to get', and anticipation and build-up to a climax. Being kind may be sexy, but it wouldn't make good TV (and is why charitable acts in screen fiction often focus on deviant acts of charity (Wiley, 2022).

For Kaylen Ward, her deviation into the world of charity appears to have had both positive and negative results. She already had a loyal fanbase and income prior to her naked philanthropy (Gorman, 2020), but the notoriety of her fundraising efforts catapulted her into the top 0.01% most successful OnlyFans creators. With that notoriety came a certain degree of controversy. Ward was rightly criticised for racism on her Twitter feed, only noticed by people looking back through her social media histories due to her newfound fame, and other (unconfirmed) accusations. Ward's actions, it seemed, were not picture perfect, the way those involved in charity are expected to be. Most notably, her brief characterisation as the 'hero of the hour' reverted rapidly to the more-established 'fallen woman' stereotype, with critics keen to reduce her actions to being at best self-serving, and at worst, nefarious. And while anyone who goes from unknown to world-famous on social media immediately becomes the subject of intrusion, trolling, and hate, Ward's sex-work background only amplified this attention. According to her Twitter feed, the nude photos Ward sent out were widely shared without her consent, her social media history was trawled for past indiscretions, numerous fake accounts were set up in her name, and she was aggressively bullied online. But, as she defiantly put it, 'My IG [Instagram] got deactivated, my family disowned me, and the guy I like won't talk to me all because of that tweet. But fuck it, save the koalas' (Ward, 2020).

There will be some who say she deserved the retribution – that sharing such explicit content of yourself, even for a good cause, means you have to accept whatever you get. As a young woman working in a highly precarious, potentially dangerous job, Ward will not be unfamiliar with such victim-blaming attitudes. But regardless of her online misadventures, Ward still did more for the people, communities, and animals ravaged by fire than almost anyone else in the world, and she did so while promoting body positivity, sexual freedom, and perhaps making us question where we draw the lines around charity morality in fundraising. She also inspired others involved in online modelling and sex work to utilise their extensive fanbases for good causes, particularly during the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown when work-from-home 'camgirls' experienced a huge boom in business (Rubattu et al, 2023).

Sex can be a powerful force, driving human behaviour in unpredictable, creative and sometimes beneficial ways. It is integrally entwined with relationships and the bonds we have with one another as human beings, and the voluntary sector understands charity fundraising to be equally relationship-driven (Burnett, 2002). Sex has long been used in fundraising, from Peta's 'I'd rather go naked than wear fur' campaign, to the £5m+ fundraising efforts of the Calendar Girls. But in her promise of 'nudes for koalas', Kaylen Ward made the relationship between sex and charity personal. She provoked uncomfortable questions about what kind of charitable action is palatable to the masses, and who gets to operationalise their power for charity, putting herself squarely in the firing line in the process. As a woman demonstrating her own agency, sexuality, and defiance, her virtuousness was always going to be rigorously challenged. And so we must ask ourselves: if charity is to encompass all human experience, maybe we need a wider vision of what charity looks like in the twenty-first century?

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