

## Annals of the Rescue Industry: Celebrities pose, feeling good lauraagustin.com

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Last week PBS ran Kristof's documentary of his *Half the Sky* book. I'm not in the US so didn't see it (and don't have the option of seeing it at all), but publicity material abounds, including photos showing Hollywood stars, such as this one of Meg Ryan hugging a girl at a shelter for victims of trafficking. Some of the press-packaged stories discuss the techniques being used to manipulate viewers into joining a *Half the Sky movement*. It's tempting to point to the maternalism inherent in the images, but the publicity makes it clear that this was conscious and deliberate – no one's pretending *real relationships* are being portrayed. Ryan explained why 'privileged celebrities' were used to tell the stories:

The actresses are the emotional conduits for the experience... Fame is such a perverse power when it comes to this type of advocacy. Celebrities bring attention to the problem, but they're also resented... How we become sensitive to one another and less judgmental and more forgiving is what's good. We're all human. If we can increase compassion in the world, then we have a better place. Meg Ryan and Somaly Mam on Celebrity, Human Trafficking, and Compassion.

*Emotional conduit* is a pop-psychology notion I'm not sure serious media analysts would go along with here. It sounds more like Kristof's *wish* about what would happen – that using attractive female actresses would magically make poor, dark, needy, less attractive women and children easier to care about. Or care about for longer than it takes to watch the documentary, long enough to sign up to do something further, like give money or volunteer on some project.

The publicity photographs have been set up to convey an intimacy disproportionate to the brief visits involved, as though Hollywood stars were gifted with an ability to bond deeply very fast. But in fact they are simply *acting*. The pictures are portraits of affection acted by people who've had training in how to do it. This has nothing to do with real feeling, and perhaps it needn't. I am not accusing anyone of cynicism here, because the whole project has been calculated.

Eva Mendes is said to have embarked on a 'life-changing' visit to Sierra Leone. In this pose she seems to be physically touching a number of children at once, at the same time leaning toward the camera as though giving herself to it.

America Ferrera plays with children of sex workers in Kolkata, India. This shot plays on Ferrera's more natural, less glamorous style but is equally contrived. The pose suggests she could be a sibling of all these children, playing on our knowledge that this actress is Latina.

Olivia Wilde in Kenya. The inclusion of a cameraperson in this shot underscores how posed and self-conscious it is. The children have obviously been told to hug her so close one might think they actually loved her. Wilde is good at acting genuine-looking emotion, but the children just look squashed and uncomfortable.

By merely standing beside two older women in Somalia (although one appears to be touching her back), Diane Lane's set-up appears less effusive and intimate, more like people of equal status standing together. Does this mean less potential *emotional conduit*?

Kristof is hoping to catalyse his movement via Crowdrise: *Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide*. Something's going on in the world of so-called social movements, isn't it? Remember the two boys with their Hope Boutique Bakery? That was part of Crowd-Fuelled Causes, and I still don't know what that does.

What I am sure about is how sophisticated media techniques are being brought in to modernise traditional Rescue-Industry events and publicity. Kristof prides himself on being a with-it guy in terms of social media – remember when he live-tweeted that brothel raid? So what's next – conversations with the camera personnel about how they set up those emotional conduits?

–*Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist*