Introduction

In 2011 the world celebrated the International Year of Volunteers + 10 (IYV+10). In recognition of this special year, Volunteering WA as a part of its commitment to strengthening and connecting communities through volunteering, undertook the first ever State of Volunteering in WA Report.

This significant report provides a picture of contemporary volunteerism in Western Australia. It captures the trends, issues, challenges and standing of both formal and informal volunteering in Western Australia. The report is a valuable resource to inform future planning, research, development and directions of Volunteering WA, its stakeholders and the wider Western Australian volunteering sector.

The State of Volunteering in WA Report is a tribute to the important place and contribution of volunteerism to the well-being of the Western Australian community. The full report and the key findings can be obtained from the Volunteering WA website.

The purpose of this paper is to focus in detail on one particular aspect of the wider report. In this instance it is women and volunteering in Western Australia.

A brief background of women and volunteering

An Australian Bureau of Statistics report published in 2011 estimated volunteer numbers in Western Australia to be 590,500, this is a volunteering participation rate of 34.9%.

It is a common perception that women volunteer in the community at a higher rate than men. Over one-third of respondents to the 2011 State of Volunteering in WA survey believe this misconception to be the case.

ABS data from 2010 indicates that men and women volunteered at equal rates in Western Australia and each gender’s participation rate is identical to the rate of the state as a whole. However women have enjoyed slightly higher participation rates in the past. Statistics provided by the ABS from 1995 show that women volunteered at a rate of 22.1% compared to a rate of 17.7% for men.

Women in Australia in 2010 were most likely to volunteer for sport and physical recreation, welfare/community, religious and, parenting/children/youth organisations. Slightly more than one-third of women volunteer at least once per week while just under one-quarter volunteer several times a year.
Volunteering during childhood is often a catalyst for people to volunteer as adults. Just under half of women volunteers participated in some kind of volunteer work as a child.

Both full and part-time employed women volunteer at higher rates than retirees and those who are not in the labour force for other reasons. Meanwhile women who are employed as professionals are the most likely to volunteer while labourers are the least likely.

It is common place for women volunteers to provide assistance to people not living in the same household. This can also be known as informal volunteering. Over two-thirds of women volunteers undertake this kind of informal assistance.

The state of women and volunteering in Western Australia

In 2011 women in Western Australia were most likely to volunteer in administration/clerical, education/tutoring/mentoring, and fundraising/retail roles and the majority of women prefer to undertake their roles on a regular and on-going basis. There is however a segment of women volunteers that are seeking volunteering roles that do not require a medium to long term commitment to an organisation. Younger women, in particular, are much more partial to other forms of volunteering. Women aged between 18 and 24 years prefer one-off event volunteering opportunities at much higher rates, while women aged 25 – 34 years expressed higher rates of preference for irregular and on-going volunteering opportunities.

Motivating factors

A personal belief in a particular cause was the highest supported factor amongst women when selecting which organisations, groups or activities with which to volunteer. However practical considerations such as the location and time commitments were almost as important. Young women aged between 18 and 24 years are not as concerned by the location. However other practical considerations are of interest to them, such as flexibility in relation to the days and times required. Women aged between 25 and 54 years selected the location as the highest supported factor. For all other age groups of women personal belief in a particular cause enjoyed the most support.

Although giving something back to the community is the most selected motivating factor for women to continue their volunteering, an existing relationship with the organisation is nearly as significant. So once women link with an organisation they are likely to remain involved with them. For young women aged 18 to 24 years having fun enjoyed the highest rates of support, along with giving something back to the community. However a passion for the activities/services was almost as prominent for this age group. Making a difference was the most significant factor for women aged between 25 and 44 years and those aged between 65 to 74 years. An existing relationship with the organisation was not as important to younger women as it was to older women.

Best practice in volunteering

Out of pocket expenses can be a common occurrence when volunteering. It is considered best practice for volunteer-involving organisations to reimburse, in full, all out of pocket expenses incurred during a volunteering episode. Most women do not have their desire or ability to volunteer reduced by the incurrence of out of pocket expenses. However those that do were more likely to be younger women aged less than 35 years or older women aged over 65 years.
Almost all women reported that undergoing background checks such as National Police checks or Working with Children checks would not reduce their ability or desire to volunteer. There were no significant variations between age groups.

Very few women volunteers were of the opinion that they have not been adequately trained for their role. However most of those who thought this were aged between 25 and 54 years.

**Family connections**

Most women volunteers have both immediate family and close friends who volunteer. However this is not the case for young women aged 18 – 24 years as they are less likely to have close friends who volunteer and much less likely to have immediate family members who volunteer. An increase in age tends to roughly correlate with the reversal of this trend.

**Informal volunteering**

An overwhelming majority of women who volunteer within formal volunteer-involving organisations also undertake informal volunteering in the community. That is giving any unpaid time to activities performed directly for the benefit of others outside their household. The most commonly undertaken informal volunteering activity by women is helping to organise an event to create community awareness of an issue. The rates of informal volunteering are substantially lower for younger women aged under 35 years when compared to older women.

**Non-volunteers**

For women who are not current volunteers but have volunteered previously, that is more than twelve months prior, the most common reason for not returning to volunteering was lack of time, closely followed by work commitments.

Women who have never volunteered before report that the most common reason for not doing so is because they don’t know what volunteering opportunities are available. Work commitments and lack of time were almost as common. It may have been expected that family commitments would also be a common reason for women not volunteering. However this did not prove to be the case.

This group of women expressed higher rates of interest in undertaking non-traditional volunteering roles, such as irregular and on-going roles and short-term roles. One of the keys to involving non-volunteers may be to offer a wider variety of formats and to move away from the traditional format of regular and on-going experiences.

Higher rates of interest were shown by women who have never volunteered in being matched with volunteering opportunities that are different to the roles they undertake during their professional working lives, when compared to current volunteers and previous volunteers.

**Summary of key points**

- Women are more likely to volunteer in administration/clerical roles.
- A personal belief in a particular cause was most important to women when selecting an organisation, group or activity with which to volunteer.
- Most women do not have their desire or ability to volunteer reduced by the incurrence of out of pocket expenses.
An overwhelming majority of women who volunteer within formal volunteer-involving organisations also undertake informal volunteering in the community.

Women who have never volunteered before report that the most common reason for not doing so is because they don’t know what volunteering opportunities are available.

Women who have never volunteered expressed higher rates of interest in undertaking non-traditional volunteering roles, such as irregular and on-going roles and short-term roles. One of the keys to involving non-volunteers may be to offer a wider variety of formats and to move away from the traditional format of regular and on-going experiences.

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References


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