

FEMALE POWER IN EQUESTRIAN SPORT: A SPORT WITH A DIFFERENCE

Karen Hennessy, University College, Dublin, Ireland

Context

Volunteers are the life-blood of voluntary organisations. They vary in terms of gender and age, depending on the nature of their volunteering. Researching volunteering patterns in Ireland, Ruddle & Mulvihill (1999) reported that for both formal (for an organisation) and informal (non-organisation related) volunteering there were significantly more female than male volunteers. Jarvis & Hancock (1996) also found that more women than men undertook voluntary work in all age groups. However, when only formal volunteering was considered, Ruddle and Mulvihill (1999) reported no significant difference between men (19%) and women (22%). Volunteering for sports organisations, however, appeared to show evidence of gender differences, with more men than women: Ruddle & Mulvihill (1999) reported that 32% of men but just 3% of women volunteered for sports organisations. In contrast, Gratton et al (2003) reported that men comprised 72% of volunteers in sports organisations in the UK. This gender difference was also reflected in the voluntary decision-making positions in sports organisations, Hennessy (2004) reporting that 75% of the decision-making positions in Irish National Governing Bodies of sport were filled by men.

There were also age differences between volunteers in regular voluntary organisations and those in sports organisations. Ruddle & Mulvihill (1999) and Jarvis & Hancock (1996) reported the prime age for volunteering as 40–59 and 35–59 years respectively. However, the age of sports volunteers has been found to be somewhat different: Gratton et al (2003) reported that sports volunteers were much more likely to come from younger age groups, with 30% aged between 18 and 24 and another 30% between 25 and 34.

The reasons for volunteering may also differ between volunteers: Stebbins (2001) noted the difference between mainstream volunteering, which is a motive-driven, freely chosen activity that is a satisfying and enjoyable leisure experience, and marginal volunteering which involves a marginalisation of free choice and a greater sense of obligation.

The aim of this research reported here was to identify:

- the characteristics of voluntary workers in an equestrian organisation, and
- the reasons for them being active in that organisation.

Methods

A questionnaire was distributed to volunteers involved in an equestrian sport. This organisation had 9 areas covering Ireland. Two clubs were randomly selected from each area, yielding 18 clubs (of a total of 64). Each club selected was then asked to list all their volunteers, from which a random selection of 30% was drawn, and sent questionnaires. 248 were returned, a 51% response.

Main results

Figure 1 shows that 65% of club volunteers were female and this representation increased at decision-making levels of the organisation, reaching 77% at national Executive level. These findings differed markedly from those of Gratton (2003) and Hennessy (2004). Figure 2 shows that the predominant age group of club volunteers was 41–50 years, and at national Executive 51 or more years. Again, these findings were in marked contrast to those of Gratton (2003) for UK sports volunteers. Figure 3 shows the percentage of volunteers who were mainstream or marginal volunteers (as defined by Stebbins, 2001), categorised by length of their volunteering experience. These findings indicate that a greater share of the more experienced volunteers were working for the sports organisation out of free choice, and fewer felt pressurised into volunteering than was the case with less experienced volunteers.

Discussion

The profile of volunteers in this equestrian organisation showed differences in gender composition (predominantly female), and age profile (predominantly 41–50 years) from Gratton et al's (2003) findings. Data on the composition of the National Executive Committee (77% female) also differed from Hennessy's earlier (2004) results. During the period of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation,

Figure 1: Volunteers' gender & position

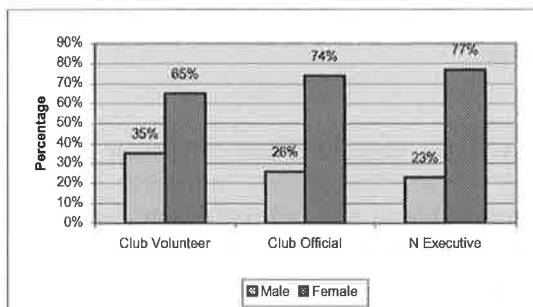


Figure 2: Volunteers' ages & positions

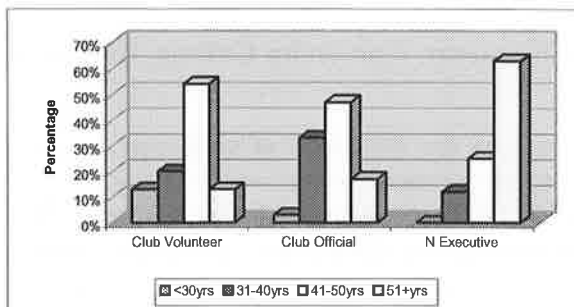
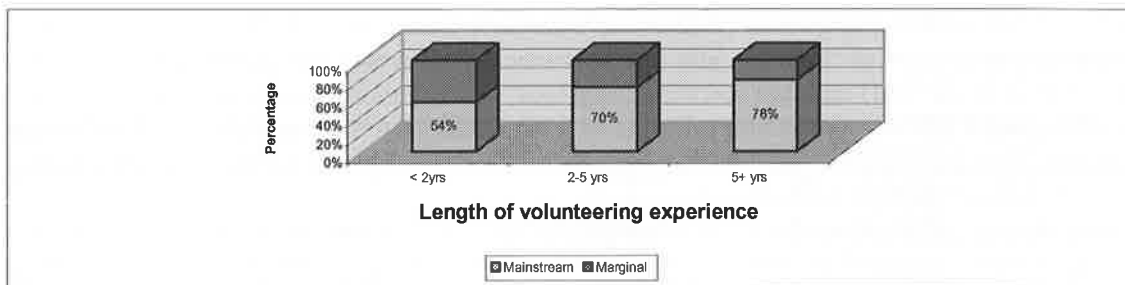


Figure 3: Mainstream/Marginal volunteering & length of volunteer experience



volunteering became established as one of the few activities suitable for middle-class women, and it is in this period that gendered stereotypes emerged. While Kendall and Knapp (1996) identified a link between social initiators and changing volunteer characteristics in more recent times, McCrone (1995) noted that gender stereotyping still existed in some organisations, and in particular those organisations that continued to have links with the landed gentry and/or tasks associated with women's traditional domestic roles. Drawing on McCrone's hypothesis, there are three key aspects of equestrian organisations which might help explain the findings reported here: (i) The Pony Club as an organisation has showed a very strong link until recently between middle-class landowners and their children's membership of the organisation; (ii) due to the nature of equestrian sport, participation of children in equestrian activities is dependent on adult support (most Pony Club members are aged under 21, predominantly children). These considerations combined with (iii) the traditional role of mothers in looking after their children, might help to explain the rather unusual volunteer profile in this sporting organisation.

Conclusion

The volunteer profile may vary from sport to sport, and appears to depend upon the specific sport and the demands of competing in it, and the members' backgrounds. Increased willingness to volunteer may develop with experience of volunteering.

References

- Gratton, C., Taylor, P., & Kokolakis, T. (2003) The changing structure of the voluntary sector in sport in the UK, 1991-2000 *Book of abstracts* 11th European Sport Management Congress, Stockholm
- Hennessy, K.D. (2004) Brighton Declaration, its impact on Irish Sport - 10 years on *Proceedings* 12th European Sport Management Conference, Ghent
- Jarvis C. & Hancock, R. (1996) Trends in volunteering and the implications for the future in Pharaoh, C. (ed, 1997) *Dimensions of the Voluntary Sector* London: Charities Aid Foundation
- Kendall, J. and Knapp, M. (1996) *The Voluntary Sector in the UK* Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Ruddle, H. & Mulvihill, R. (1999) *Reaching out: charitable giving and volunteering in the Republic of Ireland – the 1997/1998 Survey* Dublin: National College of Ireland
- Stebbins R.A. (2001) Volunteering-mainstream and marginal: preserving the leisure experience pp1-10 in Graham, M. & Foley, M. (eds) *Volunteering in Leisure, Marginal or Inclusive?* Leisure studies Association, Eastbourne

Contact: Karen.Hennessy@und.ie