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volunteering australia

**Submission in response to the Human Rights and Equal
Opportunity Commission discussion paper 'Striking the
balance: women, men, work and family'**

October 2005



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Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering in Australia. Its mission is to represent the diverse views and needs of the volunteer movement while promoting the activity of volunteering as one of enduring social, cultural and economic value.

Volunteering Australia receives funding from the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) under the National Secretariat Program (NSP) to represent the interests of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

Volunteering Australia's member organisations consist of the state and territory volunteering peak bodies, which in turn represent volunteer-involving organisations and interested individuals. Volunteering Australia works closely with a large network of regional volunteer resource centre's (VRCs), other peaks and not-for-profit organisations across all sectors.

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- Volunteering makes an important economic and social contribution to Australian society, with estimates of the economic value of volunteering ranging between \$31 and \$42 billion per annum.
- Issues contributing to the work/life balance debate . increased working hours, work intensification, casualisation of the work force and the impacts of unpaid work, child care and other caring . have implications for volunteering. Some of these implications are negative.
- The negative implications for volunteering include nonprofit organisations experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers, and the disproportionate impact of this phenomenon on nonprofit organisations who overwhelmingly rely on volunteers from the age groups spanning 25-55 years of age.
- Nonprofit organisations, employers and governments each have a role in addressing the challenges presented to volunteering by work/life balance issues.
- Nonprofit organisations need to consider a range of strategies in volunteer management to allow people, with various and often competing demands on their time, to get involved.
- Employers can assist their employees to contribute to the community through volunteering by maintaining workplace volunteering programs.
- Governments need to protect and promote the important contribution made to Australian society through volunteering by ensuring policies a) enhance the status of volunteering, and b) work to facilitate volunteering.

Volunteering Australia thanks the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for this opportunity to comment on the various issues that feed into the work/life balance debate. Long working hours, work intensification, casualisation of the work force and the impacts of unpaid work, child care and other caring all have implications for volunteering.

The key goals of paid and unpaid work in Australia for Volunteering Australia are to ensure the sustainability of volunteering in Australia, and to build on the impressive contribution volunteering makes to our social and economic life.

Nonprofit organisations, employers and government all have a part to play in achieving these goals.

Consultation

Volunteering Australia's role as national peak body requires that our knowledge about volunteering reflects the current experiences of volunteers and organisations who work with volunteers.

In preparing this submission, Volunteering Australia has consulted volunteers and nonprofit organisations involved in volunteering (nonprofit organisations involving volunteers and volunteering infrastructure organisations¹).

Our consultation explored the experiences of 134 volunteers and 273 nonprofit organisations. These nonprofit organisations involve upwards of 230,000 volunteers, who contribute more than 89,300 volunteer hours per week. The organisations and volunteers represent all volunteer sectors (see Appendix 1).

Much of the information put forward through consultation has been incorporated into this submission.

¹ Volunteering infrastructure organisations refers to volunteer resource centres (VRCs) and state peak bodies for volunteering.

Definition of formal volunteering

Formal volunteering in Australia is defined as an activity which takes place through not for profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- To be of benefit to the community;
- Of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion;
- For no financial payment; and
- In designated volunteer positions only.²

The elements of the definition make volunteering a unique activity that is distinguishable from paid work and a number of forms of unpaid work such as housework, child care, and other forms of caring.

The value of volunteering

Volunteering is an activity that delivers significant economic and social benefits. The importance of this contribution to Australian society is increasingly recognised but continues to be undervalued in relation to paid employment.

Economic value

The value of volunteering to the Australian economy can be measured in the tens of billions of dollars per annum. Various estimates rate the economic value of volunteering at between \$31 and \$42 billion dollars each year.³

The social value of volunteering

The discussion paper *Striking the balance* correctly recognises that volunteering contributes to social cohesion. Volunteering is an important contributor to social capital, the measure of the connectedness and functionality of our communities.⁴

Employment profiles of volunteers

² Definition of *Formal Volunteering* was developed by Volunteering Australia in 1997 through consultation with the volunteer sector, the unions and government.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2000) *Unpaid work and the Australian economy* pg 43; Ironmonger D *Measuring volunteering in economic terms* in Warburton J and Oppenheimer M (eds) (2000) *Volunteers and Volunteering* p 56

⁴ Onyx J, Leonard R and Hayward-Brown H (2003) *The Special Position of Volunteers in the Formation of Social Capital* *Voluntary Action* (6)1 p59

Statistics figures suggest that while paid workers are the link between paid work and volunteering has obvious implications for volunteering in Australia if pressures associated with paid employment force employees to leave or scale back their volunteering commitments.

Despite the higher rate of involvement in volunteering by those in paid work, Australians who are not in paid work tend to devote more hours to their volunteer involvements.⁵ Full time workers recorded the lowest median weekly hours. Workplace volunteering programs (where employers support their workers to participate in volunteering) are one strategy to address the link between employment and a reduction in median weekly volunteer hours. Workplace volunteering is discussed in more detail on page 10.

Men's and women's contribution to volunteering

Women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men (33% and 31% of women and men respectively volunteer).⁶ This slight difference is supported by unpublished data collected by Newspoll for Volunteering Australia in 2004.

Volunteering activity tends to peak in the age cohorts when people have dependant children, as volunteering is closely related to their children's and family activities⁷. Pressures related to caring and paid employment for this group have the potential to undermine the volunteering contribution made in the peak volunteering stage.

Pressures on work/life balance for the age groups spanning 25-55 years of age are more likely to impact on certain types of nonprofit organisation. These age groups see women tending towards volunteering in the areas of education, training and youth development and community welfare. Men are strongly represented as volunteers in sports and recreation activities. Nonprofit organisations falling within these categories are more likely than other volunteer organisations to have difficulty in attracting volunteers if pressures associated with paid and unpaid work force people to end or reduce volunteering commitments.

Impacts of work/life balance issues faced by education/training/youth development organisations and sports and recreation organisations are compounded by Australia's population ageing. Volunteers aged 65 and over record lower rates of volunteering in these areas.

⁵ ABS (2001) *Voluntary Work Survey*, pg 4

⁶ ABS (2001) *Voluntary Work Survey*, pg 3

⁷ ABS (2001) *Voluntary Work Survey*, pg 3

and caring on volunteering

While volunteering is a vibrant and adaptable force in Australian social life, it is vulnerable to pressures emanating from paid work and other unpaid work commitments.

Our stakeholder consultation supports the idea that pressures around work/life balance can and do have implications for volunteers and the organisations that involve them.

Organisations that involve volunteers

The demands of paid work and other forms of unpaid work are impacting on the experience of many nonprofit organisations in attracting and retaining volunteering, with 60% of the 273 organisations consulted by Volunteering Australia stating the demands of paid work and caring responsibilities are having a negative impact on their ability to recruit volunteers.

In addition, these organisations reported an average of 42% of their total volunteers have some form of caring responsibility. This illustrates the degree of crossover that exists between the age cohorts most subject to caring responsibilities and volunteering. Eighty-one per cent of these organisations have had volunteers end their volunteering commitment because of the demands of paid work or care for children or other relatives.

Volunteers

A similarly large proportion of volunteers surveyed (58%) have had to leave or scale back their volunteering commitments at some point because of paid work, child care or other caring commitments.

What can be done to counteract pressures of paid work and caring on volunteering?

This section explores the role of volunteer organisations, business and government in addressing the impact of paid work and other unpaid work on volunteering in Australia.

Nonprofit organisations involving volunteers

While volunteer-involving organisations often face pressures in recruiting and managing volunteers, many volunteer organisations work to develop strategies to best accommodate volunteers with paid or unpaid work responsibilities.

Some of these strategies are briefly outlined below.

A flexible approach to volunteer hours was nominated by the organisations and volunteers surveyed as the key strategy for managing volunteers. Fifty-eight per cent of all survey respondents strongly agreed that offering flexible hours to volunteers is useful in attracting volunteers to organisations.

Flexibility in hours can be variously construed as the amount of hours required by volunteers and how often, whether they are required within or outside business hours or the offer of weekend or weekday work.

For many nonprofit organisations this is a relatively easily-implemented and cost-effective strategy. Sixty-five per cent of organisations already offer volunteer work outside and within business hours.

Involve children where possible/Family volunteering

Family volunteering is a form of volunteer management where parents can bring their children to participate in a volunteering activity together. Several organisations and volunteers nominated family volunteering as a strategy for engaging volunteers with caring responsibilities.

This style of volunteering has worked extremely well in some settings, for example respite care for intellectually disabled children. However, this form of volunteering has presented obstacles for some organisations, for example some organisations have experienced difficulty in obtaining insurance coverage due to age limits imposed by some insurers.

Short term and episodic volunteering assignments

Short term volunteering is an idea that has gained broad acceptance within volunteering organisations. Short term volunteering refers to volunteering assignments with defined timeframes or tasks with a clear end point. It is a useful strategy to allay fears in volunteers that they will be expected to do ever-increasing amounts of work once they become involved with an organisation.

Episodic volunteering is the creation of once-off volunteering opportunities allowing people to get involved for one day or several hours only.

52 per cent of organisations and volunteers surveyed agreed that both short term and episodic volunteering are useful strategies for attracting volunteers to organisations.

Off-site volunteering

giving volunteers the flexibility to perform their particularly relevant to project work requiring IT or professional skills or networking on the telephone.

38 per cent of organisations and volunteers agree that remote volunteering can be usefully employed by organisations.

Other measures

Other measures suggested by stakeholders to attract volunteers are: helping prospective volunteers to understand their responsibilities prior to volunteering; making volunteer roles as attractive as possible, with interesting and varied roles, and providing a progression of positions for volunteers who would like to expand their skills and accept additional responsibility.

Employers – workplace volunteering programs

Workplace volunteering programs are an increasingly important way in which paid employees can increasingly contribute to the volunteering effort in Australia.

Workplace volunteering programs involve employers actively supporting their employees to undertake volunteering for nonprofit organisations, sometimes within working hours. This may occur on an episodic or ongoing basis.

Workplace volunteering has been adopted by many organisations as part of their activities supporting corporate social responsibility, and has a role in changing workplace cultures to more fully appreciate the importance of work/life balance and contributing to the wider community.

Thirty-nine per cent of organisations and volunteers surveyed by Volunteering Australia agreed that workplace volunteering programs are a worthwhile activity.

Governments

Governments in all jurisdictions have a role to play in promoting volunteering through volunteering-friendly policies that enhance the status of volunteers and work only to facilitate, and not obstruct, volunteering.

Governments also have a role to play in maintaining the volunteering in Australia by adopting policies that enhance and not detract from the work/life balance of Australians.

Issues contributing to the work/life balance debate, including increased working hours, work intensification, casualisation of the work force and the impacts of unpaid work, child care and other caring have implications for volunteering. Some of these implications are negative, such as the reduced ability of organisations to fill volunteer roles, particularly in the volunteer sectors that predominantly involve volunteers from the age groups likely to have dependent children.

Nonprofit organisations, employers and governments all have a role to play in ensuring the sustainability of volunteering in Australia and preserving and building on the significant social and economic contribution made by Australian volunteers.

The ability of nonprofit organisations, employers and government to achieve these ends will hinge on their ability to involve volunteers in ways that fit in with their own lives and demands; by ensuring that paid and unpaid work is organized in ways that give Australians time and opportunities to volunteer; and, by volunteering being appropriately protected and recognised in legislation and government policy.



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Newspoll (2004) Unpublished data collected for Volunteering Australia

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Nonprofits organisations involving volunteers (differentiated according to sector)

- Arts/culture
- Business/professional/union
- Community/welfare
- Education/training/youth development
- Emergency services
- Environment/animal welfare
- Foreign/international
- Health
- Law/justice/political
- Religious
- Sport/recreation