

Submission to National Strategy
to Achieve Gender Equality –
Discussion Paper

April 2023

Overview

Volunteering can improve gender equality, for example, through providing opportunities to challenge gender norms, exercise agency, and make social connections. However, the current highly gendered nature of volunteering limits its potential to promote gender equality and diminishes the wider role that volunteering and volunteers can play in enhancing the wellbeing of people of all genders. Further, greater equality in paid employment for women will not be achieved without greater gender equality in volunteering.

As highlighted in the new National Strategy for Volunteering¹, the nature and impact of the gendered nature of volunteering has received minimal policy attention. The 'invisibility' of volunteering must be addressed.

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in partnership with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies. We would like to highlight the following seven priorities in developing the National Strategy for Gender Equality:

1. Initiate a workstream within the Office for Women on volunteering, its gendered nature and impact.
2. Improve official data to illuminate the gendered nature of volunteering through reinstating and revamping the General Social Survey.
3. Ensure national strategies and frameworks include volunteering as distinct from other forms of unpaid work or care.
4. Illuminate the national economic value of volunteering and its gendered nature.
5. Recognise volunteers and Volunteer Managers (who are predominately women) in workforce strategies and occupational classifications.
6. Implement the Respect@Work recommendations including in relation to voluntary work.
7. Remove Government policy conditions that inhibit gender inclusion in volunteering.

Introduction

About the Consultation

The Australian Government has committed to the development of a National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality² which aims to guide whole-of-community action on progressing gender equality. A Discussion Paper³ was published to seek community views.

About this submission

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to inform the development of the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality.

¹ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/>

² <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality>

³ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality/consultations>

In this submission, we acknowledge that the data included is not inclusive of the diversity of gender identities in our community. In the research statistics, the terms 'men/male' and 'women/female' are used to denote those who have selected this gender option during their response to surveys. Volunteering Australia recognises that only those who identify as male or female are represented in these statistics.

Whilst the focus of this submission is gender, we would like to highlight the importance of an intersectional approach being taken which foregrounds the impact of intersecting identities and how different forms of inequality overlap and reinforce.

Volunteering and Gender

Volunteering is highly gendered, and largely reflects wider societal and economic patterns and inequalities. For example, women are more likely than men to volunteer in care and educational settings; men are more likely to volunteer in emergency services and sport. Women are more likely to volunteer informally in the community than men (which receives less support and protections) but are less likely to contribute through governance boards and committees (which provide important leadership and decision-making opportunities). The rate of formal volunteering (i.e., within organisations) is declining for both men and women. However, the decline is most evident for women, whose rate decreased from 38.1% in 2010 to 28.1% in 2019⁴.

Volunteering improves gender equality. It provides opportunities to dismantle rigid yet nuanced gender norms and for representation, for example that sees women coaching sports, or men deeply engaged in support for their children's schooling. Volunteering can expand our conceptions of gendered responsibility and drive social change. Volunteering also offers new and alternative pathways to demonstrate active citizenship through a personal expression of agency. It provides opportunities for increased social connection, skills sharing and development, confidence, and a sense of community and belonging. Volunteering is a fundamental but invisibilised pillar of primary prevention, early intervention, response to and recovery from gendered violence. Volunteers provide women with critical support across emergency response, bystander intervention, health and wellbeing, counselling, emotional support, childcare, transport, housing, food relief and more.

Data Summary

The most recent nationally representative data on volunteering is the population survey undertaken as part of the Volunteering in Australia research which informed the development of the new National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-33).

- Women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men. In April 2022, 28.6 per cent of women had done volunteer work in the previous 12 months compared to 24.7 per cent of men.
- Women were more likely than men to give work or family commitments as a reason for not volunteering (46.3 per cent of women and 35.6 per cent of men).

⁴ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/key-facts/> and See Data Summary below and additional internal analysis sent separately.

- Females and older Australians were more likely to have undertaken informal volunteering than males and younger Australians, respectively. The absolute differences by sex (in particular) are much larger for informal compared to formal volunteering. Specifically, 51.3 per cent of females undertook informal volunteering in the previous four weeks compared to 41.5 per cent of males.
- Women were more likely than men to volunteer for aged care (10.6 per cent of women compared to 6.6 per cent of men), children/youth (19.7 per cent of women and 7.7 per cent of men) and education/training organisations (14.5 per cent of women and 9.9 per cent of men), while men were more likely to volunteer for emergency services/disaster relief (5.6 per cent of women compared to 12.4 per cent of men) and sport/recreation organisations (20.6 per cent of women compared to 30.6 per cent of men).⁵
- Women were more likely than men to volunteer in companionship/social support (16.7 per cent of women compared to 11.8 per cent of men), food preparation/service/delivery (23.6 per cent of women and 13.9 per cent of men), and fundraising/sales/events roles (27.8 per cent of women compared to 20.1 per cent of men), while men were more likely to undertake board/committee (14.5 per cent of women and 23.8 per cent of men), emergency response/disaster relief/first aid/community safety (8.7 per cent of women and 14.8 per cent of men), and repairing/maintenance/gardening activities (6.6 per cent of women and 18.0 per cent of men).
- Among men who volunteer, those aged 65 or more years were the most likely to volunteer (34.3 per cent). Among women who volunteer, those aged 30-49 years were the most likely to volunteer (39.0 per cent).

The General Social Survey 2019, 2020 and Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey provide some further insights:

- Women are more likely than men to have volunteered for more than 10 years (43.0% of female volunteers compared to 32.9% of males).
- The rate of formal volunteering is declining for both men and women. However, the decline is most evident for women, whose rate decreased from 38.1% in 2010 to 28.1% in 2019.
- Female volunteers were more likely to have stopped volunteering during the early stages of COVID-19 compared to male volunteers (68.2 % of women stopped volunteering, compared to 62.9% of men).
- The proportion of men volunteering through an organisation or group decreased (from 30.7 per cent in 2019 to 23.1 per cent in 2020) more significantly than the proportion of women volunteering (from 28.5 per cent to 26.3 per cent) during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - o Throughout the pandemic, women were more likely than men to volunteer formally on a weekly basis.
 - o Among long-term volunteers (those who had volunteered for 10 years or more prior to the pandemic), women were much more likely to have stopped volunteering than men.
- When asked to describe how volunteering during COVID-19 impacted their life in general, women were slightly more likely to report negative (19.7 per cent of women and 10.4 per cent

⁵ Figures indicate the proportion of volunteers, by gender.

of men) or neutral (26.2 per cent of women and 21.4 per cent of men) changes, while men were more likely to indicate no change (20.3 per cent of women and 33.5 per cent of men).

Priorities for Achieving Gender Equality

1. Initiate a workstream on volunteering, its gendered nature and impact.

The new National Strategy for Volunteering highlights that gender dynamics in volunteering, including the relationship with paid work and domestic labour, has been neglected in public policy and needs greater exploration. Consultation and work to date to inform the National Strategy for Gender Inequality has not covered the distinct gendered characteristics and impact of volunteering. The consideration of volunteering has been subsumed, and so hidden, within unpaid work or care. Some of the questions that need examining include: What impact has the long-term decline in female participation in volunteering had on women and on volunteer services historically provided by women? To what extent is the gendered nature of volunteering exacerbating wider inequality, for example because women undertake more care-related volunteering? What might be the gendered dynamics in the exploitation of volunteers, whether that is deploying volunteers in roles that should be paid, or pressuring people to volunteer when they do not want to or feel unsafe? How do we enhance the potential of volunteering and volunteer programs to support recovery, for example to rebuild confidence, skills and connections as women navigate, respond to, and recover from experiences of gendered violence? We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Office for Women on these and other questions to develop a workstream on volunteering and to advance the Government's commitment to achieve gender equality.

2. Improve official data to illuminate the gendered nature of volunteering.

To fully understand the gendered nature of volunteering, data is needed on both formal volunteering (undertaken through an organisation) and informal volunteering (undertaken outside of an organisational context). The most reliable source of data on volunteering in Australia is collected through the General Social Survey (GSS) and is the only source of official data that covers both formal and informal volunteering. The GSS includes questions on a wide range of demographic factors meaning that analysis of the volunteering data can be undertaken, for example, by gender, sexuality, disability, employment status, and income. The GSS is currently paused and under review. We urge the Government to re-start the GSS and include a revamped suite of volunteering questions which will support the development and evaluation of the National Strategy for Gender Equality.

3. Ensure national strategies and frameworks include volunteering as distinct from other forms of unpaid work or care.

During consultations to date⁶, there have been calls for a 'national strategy for work and care', which should recognise balancing work and care as the norm for households. The gendered nature of volunteering within households needs to be brought into these conversations and, for example, consideration given to whether patterns of volunteering reinforce household gender stereotypes.

⁶ For example, see [Roundtable-Discussion-Paper_Family-and-Unpaid-Work.docx \(live.com\)](#)

Too often, volunteering is omitted or invisible (because it is subsumed within unpaid work or care) in national strategies and frameworks. It is perhaps no surprise that volunteering is invisible given the invisibilisation of unpaid work and care more broadly. The Government's proposed 'Measuring What Matters' Framework is an important development in assessing national progress through the adoption of a broad range of social and environmental indicators alongside traditional economic measures. We were encouraged to see volunteering referenced in preliminary policy themes to inform the Framework⁷. We urge the Government to give distinct consideration to volunteering in national strategies and frameworks that aim to improve gender equality and overall wellbeing.

4. Illuminate the national economic value of volunteering and its gendered nature.

The economic value of volunteering, and its gendered characteristics, is currently invisible. According to the Australian National Accounts: Non-Profit Institutions Satellite Accounts for the 2012-13 financial year (the most recent official estimate of the direct contribution that volunteers in non-profit institutions make to the Australian economy, including gross value added and gross domestic product), volunteering was estimated to have an imputed value of \$17.3 billion. However, this figure likely underestimates the broader economic value of volunteering. For example, this valuation does not account for the preventive health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering, through its facilitation of community and social connection. To pursue greater gender equality, we need to understand the economic value of formal and informal volunteering and the varying contributions of men and women. We suggest the Government include a comprehensive valuation of volunteering and other forms of unpaid work in the Australian National Accounts alongside an analysis of its gendered nature.

5. Recognise volunteers and Volunteer Managers in workforce strategies and occupational classifications.

The extent to which volunteers are included in national workforce strategies varies across Government. For example, in the aged care sector individuals engaged on a voluntary basis are included as workers in frameworks and regulation. In veterans' care, however, volunteers are not specified as part of the workforce, or noted to be among those engaged by care providers in the sector. Volunteer Managers are typically not identified in national workforce strategies.

Volunteer Managers are predominantly women. The new National Strategy for Volunteering (Strategic Objective 3.4) stresses that, whether paid or unpaid, Volunteer Managers are the lynchpin of effective volunteer involvement. However, those with responsibility for leading and managing a volunteer workforce are under-recognised and under-valued. The invisibility of Volunteer Management as a profession and lack of appreciation for the criticality of this role has consistently stifled the potential of volunteering.

The Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) aims to describe all occupations in the Australian and New Zealand labour markets. It is used to describe data for

⁷ [Measuring what matters — second consultation process | Treasury.gov.au](#)

governments, industry, and businesses to inform and shape educational pathways, skilled migration programs and workforce strategies. Volunteer Management is a distinct occupation with its own training and professional development and yet it is not currently included in ANZSCO, so perpetuating the invisibility of the largely female workforce of Volunteer Managers. The ABS is undertaking a comprehensive review of the ANZSCO classification. We urge the Government to include volunteers and Volunteer Managers consistently in national workforce strategies and the ABS to include Volunteer Managers as a separate occupation in the ANZSCO classification system.

6. Implement the Respect@Work recommendations including in relation to voluntary work.

We welcome the Government's commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Australian Human Rights Commission's Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report (2020)⁸ and that the National Strategy for Gender Equality will support this work. Volunteering Australia and Justice Connect⁹ have been working together to campaign for stronger, nationally consistent protections for volunteers and unpaid workers facing sexual harassment in the workplace. The Australian Human Rights Commission incorporated the key recommendation to change the Sex Discrimination Act to ensure 'workplace participant' and 'workplace' cover volunteers and other unpaid workers, and this change has passed through Parliament. We look forward to the implementation of all the Respect@Work recommendations and to ensuring that volunteers and other unpaid workers across Australia are protected from sexual harassment and that volunteer involving organisations have a positive duty to prevent, identify and respond to sexual harassment.

7. Remove Government policy conditions that inhibit gender inclusion in volunteering.

The National Strategy for Volunteering (Strategic Objective 3.1) calls for volunteering to be a cross-portfolio issue in Government and highlights the inconsistencies in how government policy enables or inhibits inclusive and sustainable volunteering. For example, volunteering provides a flexible option for single parents (who are predominantly women) to undertake prevocational training, build skills, connect with the community, and ensure social supports. Connecting people with meaningful and fulfilling opportunities to volunteer should be supported in government policy. However, while the contributions of volunteering to Australian communities should be acknowledged and supported in relevant government programs, participation in ParentsNext should not be mandatory, and volunteering should not be included as a compulsory activity. Requiring participation in a program in order to receive a payment does not meet our definition of volunteering as "time willingly given, for the common good and without financial gain."¹⁰ Further, the general requirement that volunteering to fulfil mutual obligations must not be undertaken in a person's own home greatly limits the accessibility of volunteering and does not acknowledge changes in volunteer engagement, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask the Government to amend these

⁸ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/respectwork-sexual-harassment-national-inquiry-report-2020>

⁹ [Reforms welcome but more needs to be done to protect volunteers - Volunteering Australia](#)

¹⁰ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/#/>

conditions as part of the current review of Workforce Australia, and that the National Strategy for Gender Equality considers how current Government policy conditions are inhibiting gender inclusion in volunteering.

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote a strong, connected, and resilient Australian community through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

Volunteering Australia Contacts

Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer
ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org
0428 186 736

Sue Regan
Deputy CEO & Policy Director
sue@volunteeringaustralia.org
0480 258 723

State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

VolunteeringACT
www.volunteeringact.org.au
02 6251 4060
info@volunteeringact.org.au

Volunteering Tasmania
www.volunteeringtas.org.au
03 6231 5550
admin@volunteeringtas.org.au

The Centre for Volunteering (NSW)
www.volunteering.com.au
02 9261 3600
info@volunteering.com.au

Volunteering Victoria
www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au
03 8327 8500
info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au

Volunteering Queensland
www.volunteeringqld.org.au
07 3002 7600
reception@volunteeringqld.org.au

Volunteering WA
www.volunteeringwa.org.au
08 9482 4333
info@volunteeringwa.org.au

Volunteering SA&NT
www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au
08 8221 7177
reception@volunteeringsa-nt.org.au