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# What's Gender Got to Do with It?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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The sex-typing of volunteering as feminine--and the disproportionate number of women in director of volunteer positions--needs to be acknowledged and addressed. This is a complex issue and manifests itself in numerous ways. It's impossible for me to fully address it in this column, however I can certainly introduce questions to begin the dialogue.

## *Labels*

Have you noticed that women in volunteer roles are often called "volunteers" and the women coordinating these volunteers are called "directors of volunteers," yet volunteer activities and professions that are mainly associated with men or with equal gender participation use other terms to describe their work? Here are a few examples:

- Political campaign coordinating
- Youth sports coaching
- Firefighting and emergency rescue
- Trusteeship
- Clergy
- Labor union organizing
- Charity golf tournaments
- Free law or tax clinics
- Protest movements
- Draft resistance
- Neighborhood organizing
- Alumni activities

Why didn't the label of "volunteer" stick to these activities? As many of you have heard me say: "Men have always volunteered, they just called themselves coaches, trustees, and firemen."

Whether or not a non-paid worker is called a "volunteer" may seem like an insignificant question, yet the labeling is serious because time and again it stops us from joining forces with all of our colleagues. Why don't fire chiefs or ministers attend conferences on volunteer management? Isn't recruiting poll watchers or demonstration security leaders the same challenge as recruiting friendly visitors or docents? Why is this so hard to interpret to those who ought to see our common concerns?

### *Money vs. Time*

Another gender-based issue is the split between development officers, traditionally men, and directors of volunteers, traditionally women. Who has the higher status and the higher salary? Why are fundraising volunteers so often separated administratively from frontline service volunteers? Why do male volunteers run capital campaigns and female volunteers run gala dinners? Some of the answers are historically obvious, some are due to sexism. We must learn to value both "fund raising" and "people raising" equally. And we in volunteer administration must welcome a better blending of the two challenges. Think of how obvious the importance of both money and time becomes when we re-label our goal as community support.

### *Representatives*

Despite the belief that women are the mainstay of volunteer management, men often are the spokespeople of the field. This is quite true in academic circles, where the male scholars examining volunteering far outnumber the women. Executive directors of volunteer-related organizations and keynote speakers at conferences are more likely to be male than female. The speakers' roster at the Presidents' Summit also reflected the "male as expert" slant. Except for Oprah, Presidential wives, and Cabinet Secretaries, almost no women were on panels based purely on their own credentials.

Perhaps this is why some of the "commitments" rankle. Since child care and volunteering are perceived to be women's subjects, what is the message of speaking about "failure" to help our young people? And what is the message of turning to the military and to businessmen for the answers?

So?

There are surely shades of gray in this issue, such as the many fine men who are "a director of volunteers and proud of it!" and the growing number of women breaking down glass ceilings and other career barriers. But I believe that we must acknowledge the sexism that openly and insidiously permeates our field. Unless we can broaden the scope of volunteerism to ALL the activities we truly encompass, we will always be marginalized to "nice," "helper" roles, underpaid and undervalued.

So...women AND men of the field, what do YOU think?

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***Response from Doug Mackay, Active Volunteer, Pennsylvania***

There definitely is a problem with the field lacking male volunteer leaders. I enjoy conferences, and not just because I know no one else will be in the men's room at break time! I think men are afraid. Afraid of woman in charge, women with ideas women who have strong opinions. I can appreciate this fear, certainly, but I also am afraid of all the men in charge who have the same qualities, and look at where our systems and institutions have gone. Guys just don't like to be told what to do by any woman except "the wife." For all the power men have, they're weak.

The problem may stem from poor teaching of children: teaching the qualities that make up a strong volunteer leader or, indeed, a strong volunteer (actually a strong citizen). Compassion, patience, perseverance, tolerance, understanding, cooperation, etc. Are these "male" qualities, especially seen in our male leaders, local, national, and institutional?

In my capacity as a volunteer organizer and leader, I've taken the opportunity to involve children in service projects or volunteer activities. Everybody needs to involve children in creative ways. Everybody needs to teach children that power and control need not be equated with leadership and directing. If society continues to equate wealth (ex. money) with power, and ignore the other measures of success (ex. self worth) then volunteering will always be fractionalized and labeled.

As far as why don't fire companies and sports leagues learn more about volunteer recruitment, etc.? They think they know the answers and are unwilling to think outside their box. We may need to wait out the current adult population before we see changes, but only if we teach children how to think outside their box now.

***Submitted by Bruce Glasrud, The Volunteer Center - St. Paul, Minnesota***

Yes Doug, there is never a wait for the bathrooms - and that is about the only benefit for a male in the field. The rest is a daily minefield. For years the thought has been: "there are few men in the field because the salaries are so low", ergo "the salaries are so low because there are few men in the field." And that is the end of the conversation. Witness the few responses to this topic, unless it relates to the same old "gender equity" song. Doug says the men are afraid. Perhaps, but I think the females are even more afraid. I have had female supervisors for most of my working life, including in the military. Yet, professional relationships are as hard if not harder for males to build in this field where M/F ratios are reversed. If I ask a female colleague to "do lunch" - what does she think I'm after . . . a colleague? . . . or am I after something else? And if I do have a female colleague that I pal around with - what do (and have, by the way) others think is going on?

It has also been my experience several times not to get hired because (and this has been confirmed by female colleagues familiar with the persons in question) because the female supervisor was uncomfortable with supervising a male. I am also constantly aware of having to be viewed by some as a "threatening male" whenever I open my mouth in a committee meeting. (the meeting notice I received with the little bunny rabbits on the top by the way!) Unless we ALL address the field with more professionalism (and this includes, quite frankly, to eschew using the field as a venue for gender issues), the few men that trickle into the field are going to trickle out - faster than the average 16 months length of stay for a volunteer director. There, I finally said it. What a "Pushy Guy"! Am I feeling - pushed - out of the field? You bet! The question is: how many more males have to come and go before the females address their own reverse discrimination issues? I'm probably not going to be around long enough to find out.

***Response from Diane L Leipper, Leipper Management Group, Nevada USA***

In regards to the gender bias issue, an interesting article to contemplate is an article titled "The Road to the Top Job: Nonprofit Management Experience" in the September 1997 issue of Association Management from ASAE.

I think a lot of this issue relates to your previous "Hot Topic" on whether or not volunteer management is a profession.

***Response from Sarah Elliston, Professional Development Associate, United Way Volunteer Resource Center, Cincinnati, Ohio***

I agree that sexism is rampant in the field and the examples you give are obvious ones where men (traditional bread winners) have done capital campaigns while women hold events (traditional party givers). At our United Way, two of the three managers in the Volunteer Resource Department are men, although both have been involved in volunteer resource development or coordination for more than 5 years) and our Department Vice President is also a man. To his credit, however, he has started speaking to agency CEO groups about the importance of the executive director in the volunteer program (from 'From the Top Down' of course) and he attends the POLF conference to learn more about voluntarism.

It's interesting that the voluntarism scholars on university campuses are men although not surprising. I don't know why our field would escape the traditional cultural conditioning that is rampant in the rest of society.

In some cases we women coordinators are our own worst enemy. I have had coordinators talk about their "little volunteer group" in a diminutive and disparaging style. I know women volunteer coordinators who refuse to set boundaries with their organization and act as if they can do it all. The men ask the organizations to set priorities.

I know women volunteer coordinators who try to be all things to all people, and end up burning out in the position. Whoever is hired in the position next, male or female, is expected to do the same. The women burn out, the men leave if the organization won't set boundaries. Other women volunteer coordinators seem incapable of sharing responsibility and cause irreparable harm because no one else in their organization learns about the volunteer program.

It seems so simple that I am probably missing something. If volunteer coordinators delegate their responsibilities back to paid staff for ideas, supervision, recruitment and evaluation, eventually the paid staff starts to learn about working with volunteers. If the coordinator has her self-esteem in hand, knows who she is and refuses to be a victim, she will prevail in their organization. Changing the world is another story but it starts with each of us changing our selves and then our organizations.

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