

## The Value of Volunteering

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Ruth Gardner has been manager of the Canterbury Volunteer Centre for the past six years. During that time over four thousand women have been interviewed and referred to voluntary positions with local not-for-profit organisations. Ruth will talk about the kind of work these women choose to do, the benefits they derive from volunteering, and the trends she has observed.

When asked to present this paper I was very aware of the scarcity of relevant New Zealand research about voluntary work and of my dislike of academic papers. This paper therefore is based mainly on my own thoughtful experience and informal anecdotal research.

I'm the paid Manager of Volunteering Canterbury, a position I've held for six years. Like so many organisations in the voluntary sector we have limited resources and I've chosen to work on this paper in my own time as a volunteer. I've had a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction from participating in this seminar and from supporting SROW in this way, so for me there is personal value and meaning in being a volunteer here today. I hope I'm helping in a small way to increase knowledge about women's lives and ultimately to increase the choices available to women, a cause I am passionate about. I imagine that all the women involved in organising and presenting this symposium could say the same. Such are the benefits of volunteering!

The definition of voluntary work which we use at the Centre and on which this paper is based is that it is "unpaid, for the benefit of the community, and done of one's own free will." Before continuing I'd like to ask each of you to reflect for a moment on the voluntary work you do and have done..... What are the benefits you gained from doing that work?..... Has it changed the way you think about issues, the choices you've made in your life?..... For each of you the answers will be different, and that is typical of volunteering. The opportunities are wide and the choices are many. Any particular volunteer role may bring different benefits to different women depending on their own life experiences and their needs at the time. There is flexibility and freedom of a kind that is rarely found in paid employment. Volunteering makes a difference, it is different, and it can be whatever the volunteer wants it to be.

The value of volunteering is not a monetary value. If we measure this work in dollar terms we actually reduce its value because the essence of volunteering is that it is a gift, freely given. Its value can be the value the individual volunteer puts on it or even a great deal more, and that value will be as different and complex as the volunteers themselves. There may be a value to those who receive a particular volunteer service, there may also be a value to their family and friends, and ultimately there is a value to the wider community which may be perceived in different ways by different members of that community.

Our society, which tends to measure everything in dollar terms has been slow to recognise the value of voluntary work, but some recognition is happening, for example there are questions about unpaid work in the census and in the Time Use Survey. There is international recognition shown by the fact that the United Nations have designated 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers.

The Canterbury Volunteer Centre is one of eleven Centres in this country which offer an Information and Referral Service where potential volunteers can find out about the range of volunteer opportunities available. All these Centres rely on volunteer effort to provide their services.

**Work**

Women do every kind of voluntary work imaginable. The 1996 census showed that 45% of women do some form of unpaid work outside the household. This was grouped into:

- ┆ Caring for Children (45%)
- ┆ Administration and Policy Work (42%)
  - ┆ Household work (31%)
- ┆ Teaching, training and coaching (30%)
  - ┆ Fund-raising (20%)
  - ┆ Other (12%)

The Time Use Survey has shown that women spend two hours more than men per day doing unpaid work, with an average of 15 minutes per day being spent on unpaid work for community organisations.

Much of this unpaid work will not fit our definition of voluntary work. However the Time Use Survey also looked at unpaid work outside the home, which is more likely to be voluntary. Interestingly Maori (both women and men) do more unpaid work outside the home than non-Maori, an average of 39 minutes per day compared to the 31 minutes of non-Maori, and for Maori women and men the most common type of unpaid work outside the home is looking after a child who is not their own.

During the year ended 31 March 2000 Volunteering Canterbury made 1289 referrals of women to voluntary positions with not-for-profit organisations.. The most popular categories chosen were

- ┆ Administration (22%)
- ┆ Youth/child work (19%)
- ┆ Befriending (14%)

It is interesting that these were also the most popular choices for men. The choices made have varied very little over the 12 years the Centre has been operating and are of course influenced by the kinds of positions offered.

Also consistent over the years is the proportion of women volunteers coming to the Centre, which has remained at around 70%. The 1991 Pilot Time-Use Survey indicated that women spent 31% of their time on unpaid work and men 12%. In this context unpaid work included caring for children, older people and others, as well as household and community work. Women's ability to participate in the paid labour force is greatly affected by the amount of unpaid work they do and women doing necessary unpaid work are restricted in their ability to take up paid work.

For many people, especially women on whom the responsibility for care of children and elders is more likely to fall, the line between voluntary and other unpaid work may often be blurred. It must be remembered that much volunteering is also done in an informal setting, outside of any organisational structure. Many women work in self help or support groups, to promote such causes as peace, social justice, and conservation, or simply by helping friends and neighbours.

There are women who would never think of themselves as volunteers and if asked would probably deny the label, but they "help out with" school fairs, transporting sports teams, etc. Or they "are involved with" Kindergarten committees, Brownie packs, or P.T.A.'s. Often volunteer involvement starts when a mother offers to provide an extra hand for an activity her children are undertaking.

### **Benefits**

Women who volunteer do so for many different reasons. A quick brainstorm session with a group of fourteen women volunteers in July 2000 produced the following list of benefits of volunteering:



### **I Affiliation**

Volunteers who are motivated by affiliation enjoy working in small groups where they can have lots of interaction with others. They like to help other people and to have a sense of belonging.

If a volunteer is doing a task that meets her needs she will be more likely to enjoy her volunteer work and to continue with it. The benefits of voluntary work are generally consistent between organisations and cover personal development as well as contributions to the community. While most people understand the value to future paid careers, voluntary work is not often promoted this way, and this is only a small part of the wider picture of benefits to individual volunteers and to the community. Today it is accepted that there are many motives for being a volunteer. This is different from past times when altruism was generally seen as the only motive and volunteers were often seen to be working from a charitable or "top down" model. While altruism remains a motive for many volunteers there is much more awareness of the need for empowerment of disadvantaged people who may be the recipients of voluntary services and the community development or "bottom up" model is prevalent in many organisations.

Women may decide to volunteer for one particular reason, but later find that they have gained in other unexpected ways.

Catherine Bates points out that parenting (especially in the early years) is a time when women's confidence can be severely stretched no matter how successful they were or are in a professional field. Talking to like minded people and feeling valued in a role are important, and volunteering can provide these. As well as improving individual skills women gain a sense of worth, greater confidence in their abilities, and can overcome isolation.

In the past many young women had the role model of a mother who did a great deal of community work. My own mother was proud to receive a certificate thanking her for her fifteen years' service as a weekly volunteer for Communicare CMA in Auckland and a gold watch for twenty-five years service as voluntary treasurer of a large incorporated society.

As we have moved to a more individualistic and less secure society these role models may not be so apparent, but young women are often encouraged to volunteer by schools who promote community service options and schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

A study commissioned by Volunteering Canterbury in 1996 showed that 76% of young women had done some form of voluntary work since age 14 (compared with 57% of young men). "Care and concern for others" was seen as an important reason for volunteering by 85% of these young women. Other benefits cited were work skills, meeting people, personal skills, and fun. The Time Use Survey shows that young women 18-24 years do much more unpaid work than their male counterparts.

Jean Styles a superannuitant writing in the "Listener" 20/5/00 stated: "We are still active members of our community and each week spend hours in voluntary service that seems to be so necessary..... We continue to be valuable members of society."

An Australian study showed that voluntary work could be crucial in helping women, especially new settlers, to establish new networks, gain a feeling of belonging, and find a purpose in their lives. Women working voluntarily in organisations such as Women's Refuge and Rape Crisis Centres, have helped to raise awareness of important issues. Women who volunteer for charitable motives have often worked alongside those who have a passion for social justice and are seeking to change society.

### **Trends**

In the early days of Pakeha settlement in New Zealand there were several reasons for women to do voluntary work. For some there was religious missionary zeal in helping those who were less

fortunate. Those who came from the British aristocracy saw it as a charitable duty. For the majority however there was the simple understanding that in this new and sometimes lonely country they needed to help each other if they were to survive. The oldest voluntary organisation in Australasia with an unbroken record of service is the Onehunga Ladies' Benevolent Society which was founded in 1863 to care for pakeha refugees from war in the Waikato.

For Maori women working for and giving to the community was always an integral part of marae life. That this has continued is demonstrated by the Time Use Survey which shows that Maori women do more unpaid work outside the home than non-Maori women. The fact that only 5% of the women who register at Canterbury Volunteer Centre identify as Maori would tend to suggest that they find voluntary work through their own networks.

In the 1970's and earlier volunteering could provide a creative outlet for women and there were many very able women doing voluntary work. Today there are many more paid careers open to women, and there is also a need to stay in one's chosen career as time taken out for child rearing or volunteering may jeopardise chances of promotion. The restructuring and downsizing of the 1980's has put pressure on women to earn money as families increasingly need two incomes to survive. The increasing demands and casualization of paid employment have made it harder for anyone to give a fixed commitment to volunteering. Volunteering Canterbury has experienced a drop in the number of new volunteers over the past year and we believe the most likely reason for this is a growing lack of security.

A number of agencies, both in New Zealand and elsewhere have noted that it is now more difficult to recruit volunteers. This is shown by the fact that organisations which formerly relied on service clubs like Lions and Rotary to assist with their annual street appeals may now offer student collectors a percentage of their takings to encourage involvement. The Recreation and Sports Discussion Document released by Christchurch City Council's Leisure Unit in August 2000 suggests that clubs might need to consider rewarding volunteers in the future, presumably with money.

There is a continuing trend towards shorter term volunteering, e.g. the Girl Guides Association reports that twenty years ago leaders would give an average of five years' service to the movement. Today the average is two and a half years.

For some women the increasing trend towards formalization of voluntary services may also be off putting. Demands of funders and contracting bodies that volunteer hours be recorded, and the services be cost effective have changed the culture of volunteering in recent years.

Don Borrie, Chairperson of Porirua Council of Social Services, writing in "Signpost" Winter 2000 states "Suffering from ever-decreasing resources, ever increasing demands from funding agencies for more and detailed accountability modelled on business practice, voluntary associations, especially those in local communities, collapsed under the strain. For a time, well-intentioned volunteers attempted to maintain associations because of indisputable social and economic need, but in time even long-serving volunteers found themselves unable to cope with the strain of foreign computer language, inputs, outputs, contracts, to say nothing of competition coming from entrepreneurs eager to 'make a buck' doing community work."

While some voluntary organisations embraced the more human, democratic and collective ways of working that feminism introduced in the 1970's, recent government legislation, especially the Employment Contracts Act, forced many to abandon their consensus decision-making and return to more hierarchical structures. Coupled with increased competition for funding this has meant in some cases that policy decisions have moved further into the hands of paid workers and there are fewer opportunities for volunteers to be involved at policy level.

In earlier times women used volunteering as an outlet for their creativity and dedication. It could also provide a path from the private to the public world. Now the whole social situation, including the position of women, has become more complex. However the benefits women gain from volunteering at any stage of their lives will still be personal empowerment, social connection and

community development. Volunteering is undoubtedly valuable to women and to the causes they support.

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### Canterbury Volunteer Centre papers

- | [The Value of Volunteering](#) for SROW Symposium by Ruth Gardner, September 2000
  - | [Gifting - and the Consequences of its Absence](#) by Katherine Peet, May 1999
- | [Goodwork - A New Way of Addressing the Employment Issue](#) by Katherine Peet, 1996
  - | [Volunteering and Local Government](#) by David Gregory, 2001
  - | [Valuing Human Capital](#) by Katherine Peet, March 2001
  - | [Sustainable Work](#) by Katherine Peet, April 2000

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