

# employed women: valuable 4-H volunteers

---

Gene C. Whaples  
Joanne M. Bordelon

Is volunteerism declining because of the rapidly increasing number of women entering the work force? Women supply 75% of the 4-H volunteer force nationwide.<sup>1</sup> Participation of women in the work force is expected to increase to 65% by 1990.<sup>2</sup> The impact of this increase could dramatically affect the future of organizations that depend on volunteers. Economics and the changing role of women have been strong forces pulling at the seams of the volunteer structure. Women have in the past often devoted to volunteer work the same kind of time, attention, and energy they would to a paying job. Now, many are deciding to take paid employment.

The changing role of women has spotlighted the role of women in volunteer positions. The National Organization of Women claims that volunteerism reinforces the "second class" status of women.<sup>3</sup> Volunteer organizations further contribute to the view that employed women don't volunteer.

In an effort to explore the phenomenon between employment and volunteerism in 4-H among women, a statewide study was conducted in Maryland in 1979. The study, using a mail questionnaire to survey 219 randomly selected adult female 4-H volunteers, out of a population of 1,445, netted a 75% usable response.<sup>4</sup> The two major issues addressed were: How many 4-H volunteers are employed? How do they differ from the nonemployed volunteers?

## Findings

The results revealed that 65% of the volunteers were employed. Of those, 57% worked full time, the majority

---

*Gene C. Whaples:* Associate Professor, Department of Agriculture and Extension Education, University of Maryland—College Park and *Joanne M. Bordelon:* Extension Service Agent, Anne Arundel County, Maryland. Accepted for publication: January, 1983.

holding white-collar positions. One in 10 indicated she was the *only* adult in her household and 15% were the primary wage earner.

A major difference noted between the employed and nonemployed was the type of volunteer work they performed. Employed women were more likely to be project leaders. Among the employed women, 50% were project leader volunteers, while only 36% of the nonemployed women performed this task. The majority of employed women weren't volunteers before employment. Many women became volunteers after they were employed. These findings contradict the popular literature.<sup>5</sup>

This study suggests that the picture isn't so grim. The reduction of the female volunteer forces, due to women's increasing return to the job market, may only be a myth. The either/or status of paid employment versus volunteerism hasn't often taken into account the lack of satisfaction or opportunity for creativity of the employment situation.

While many women may be returning to or entering an intensely time-consuming or motivating field of employment, many others are working a 40-hour week of tedium.<sup>6</sup> Volunteerism for this group can be a creative outlet, change of pace, or social diversion. Some women looking for enrichment through volunteerism are even willing to pay for the opportunity. In this study, 12% of the employed and nonemployed women were using child care services so they could volunteer.

---

**...Volunteering in 4-H can provide an opportunity for strengthened family relationships, serve as a creative outlet, or be a change of pace. The promising future of volunteerism will only be limited by the ability of professionals to tailor their programs to the rapidly expanding population of employed women.**

---

Looking at the other extreme of the employment picture, the well-established career woman may also volunteer to share employment-related skills. This approach may appeal to the woman who loves her job and would gladly "work/volunteer" at it 24 hours a day. Volunteering existing job skills doesn't require a great deal of effort, but affords the volunteer additional recognition. This study revealed that 14% of the employed women were aware of release time programs provided by employers. This policy suggests that some employers view volunteerism as a valuable community service they'll support.

Other reasons for optimism about the future of volunteerism exist. In this study, 84% of the nonemployed women said they'd continue their volunteer work if they obtained employment. Women who were volunteers before employment indicated the biggest change in their volunteer activity was lack of time and conflicts with work hours. Others said they worked volunteerism around their jobs and spent more time on 4-H in the evenings. Both employed and nonemployed women are averaging 12 hours per month as 4-H volunteers.

The majority of both the employed and nonemployed 4-H volunteers stayed involved to "benefit their children" and because of "a desire to help people." (Over 90% had children in 4-H.) Volunteer activity in 4-H can be viewed as an enhancement of the parent-child relationship and a direct benefit for the children, who employed women may feel they're depriving because of their employment. 4-H is often described as a "family affair," and this approach can help reinforce the parental benefits of volunteerism. The largest group of volunteers in this study had children between the age of 13-19, and the number of hours volunteered increased with the age of the oldest child. Nearly 30% indicated they volunteered because they were asked.

## **4-H Experience**

The major initial reason for volunteering among employed women was their positive experience as a 4-H member (40% had been members), belief in the program, and enjoyment of working with children. While it appears easier to recruit 4-H alumni, in some cases these "easy recruits" may cause other problems. Comments by study participants suggested that the wonderful memories of their 4-H experience may lead some to volunteer, but those same memories may also turn other alumni in the opposite direction. The largest objection to volunteer involvement noted by alumni was the memory of their 4-H leader who was a "super leader" and made 4-H her full-time "job." This perception convinced employed alumni they didn't have the time or energy to do the job.

One possible solution to overcoming the "super-leader" image is to have the nonvolunteering alumni with a "super-leader" past become minimally involved in a 4-H event as a judge or spectator. By carefully selecting employed leaders to make casual conversation about their leadership roles and their employment situation with the designated alumni, the chances for future involvement can be greatly increased.

Educating volunteers is critical if 4-H is to offer a quality program to youth. This study revealed that both employed

and nonemployed women prefer training on weekday evenings. A second choice was weekend afternoons.

## **Recommendations**

The differences between the employed and nonemployed woman should be carefully considered when recruiting and maintaining volunteers.

The following suggestions are offered to try and reach out to employed women:

1. Because employed women are more likely to be project leaders, recruit with this knowledge in mind.
2. Tailor recruitment and training to the hours most suitable to employees' schedules.
3. Don't ignore the workplace as a recruiting location.
4. Working mothers are often concerned about the quantity and quality of time spent with their children. The interaction between child and parent through 4-H work is a major selling point when recruiting working women.
5. Employment situations vary dramatically, and these differences should be taken into consideration when planning programs with employed women.

## **Conclusion**

Employed women are and will continue to be a major source of 4-H volunteers. With the anticipated growth of numbers of women in the work force, increased planning needs to occur to meet the needs of employed women. Volunteering in 4-H can provide an opportunity for strengthened family relationships, serve as a creative outlet, or be a change of pace. The promising future of volunteerism will only be limited by the ability of professionals to tailor their programs to the rapidly expanding population of employed women.

The days of the lifetime volunteer are rapidly fading and the future volunteer force will be employed in greater numbers. The challenge for the volunteer coordinator is the need to involve many more people to accomplish a task.

Long-range planning and the use of seasonal and short-term volunteers are patterns that will blend well with employed volunteers.

Handling the new challenge of volunteer recruitment and management will require dedicated and well-trained professionals. The result will be a viable and expanding volunteer program that grows with the changing employment status of women.

## **Footnotes**

1. *Federal Extension Service, 4-H. . .* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), p. 16.
2. U.S., Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *U.S. Working Women: A Data Book* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 28.
3. Women and Volunteerism Task Force, *Volunteerism: What It's All About* (Berkeley, California: National Organization for Women, 1971).
4. Joanne M. Bordelon, "Employment Characteristics of Female 4-H Volunteers in Maryland" (Master's thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 1979).
5. Lucille Kuehn, "American Volunteerism: An Anti-History with Antiheroines" (Paper presented at conference on "Woman: Resource for a Changing World," Radcliffe Institute, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April, 1972); Morton Hunt, *Her Infinite Variety* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962); Jane R. Chapman, *Economic Independence of Women* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976); and Arlene K. Daniels, *A Summary of Research Concerns on Women's Issues* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1975).
6. U.S., Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *U.S. Working Women*.