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## Women's Participation in Voluntary Associations in Italy.

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# W

## 2 **Women's Participation in Voluntary** 3 **Associations in Italy**

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### 7 **Definition**

8 Voluntary associations could be laboratories for  
9 testing different organizational forms, in which  
10 women could have (a) a greater chance (than in  
11 for-profit organizations) of participating actively  
12 in the association and (b) more access to mana-  
13 gerial and leadership roles. For this goal, volun-  
14 teers need organizational rules and ▶ **norms**  
15 oriented toward encouraging them to participate  
16 in all organizational roles.

### 17 **Description**

#### 18 **Introduction**

19 ▶ **Volunteerism** is an extremely fascinating con-  
20 text for social science scholars: lacking the eco-  
21 nomic variable of the relationship within the  
22 working group, it is possible to investigate the  
23 phenomena of teamwork without the bonds that  
24 generally characterize for-profit organizations  
25 (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005). Women's participation  
26 is among the topics investigated (Einolf, 2011).  
27 According to studies conducted in Italy, the num-  
28 ber of women engaged in volunteerism has

increased year by year, and women currently 29  
account for 50.8 % of the entire national volun- 30  
teer population. A third of these women have 31  
▶ **leadership** roles, and in 70 % of all cases, 32  
such roles are performed in associations with 33  
a predominantly female membership (i.e., at 34  
least 60 %). Of all the ▶ **voluntary** associations 35  
in Italy, 30.2 % are made up largely or entirely of 36  
women, while 40.5 % have an all-male member- 37  
ship. Of those with male and female members, 38  
37.7 % women account for between 0 % and 33 % 39  
of all members, while 32.2 % have a female 40  
membership of between 34 % and 66 %. As for 41  
the characteristics of women who provide volun- 42  
teer services in largely female associations, 43  
56.3 % are over 45 years of age (in the predom- 44  
inantly male voluntary associations, the percent- 45  
age for this age group is less than half), and 63 % 46  
are women who turn to voluntary activities at the 47  
end of their working life (i.e., after retirement) or 48  
do not have a job (students, housewives) 49  
(Frisanco, 2001; ~~International Society of Trans-~~ 50  
~~port Aircraft Trading~~ [ISTAT], 2005). As shown 51  
in previous research (see Pearce, 1993), volun- 52  
tary associations also attract volunteers because 53  
of their different organizational approach (in 54  
terms of rules and patterns) compared to for- 55  
profit groups. Men and women who are members 56  
of voluntary associations may have an opportu- 57  
nity to acquire new skills (e.g., to study history 58  
and art to accompany tourists visiting a museum) 59  
or to put some particular competence into prac- 60  
tice that they would otherwise have no particular 61  
use for (e.g., teaching disadvantaged young 62

63 people to play the guitar) or that is of no particular  
64 relevance in ordinary life (e.g., driving a car to  
65 accompany patients). In this particular context,  
66 do women have a greater chance (than in for-  
67 profit organizations) of participating actively in  
68 the association, do they have more access to  
69 managerial and leadership roles?

## 70 Method

71 In order to answer these questions, an investiga-  
72 tion was conducted involving 91 volunteers.  
73 They belong to different types of associations:  
74 organizations engaged in social work, support  
75 for cooperation and development projects, cul-  
76 tural promotion, emergency services, environ-  
77 mental protection, safeguarding human and civil  
78 rights, and health care (13 volunteers from each  
79 association). Women accounted for 57.2 % of the  
80 participants, whose age ranged from 16 to 73  
81 (median, 45 years). They answered questions  
82 such as how are dates and times defined for  
83 group activities (e.g., meetings) and individual  
84 activities (e.g., shifts in the soup kitchen), when  
85 and how are decisions made, and what character-  
86 istics are required to become a manager or leader.  
87 ► Content analysis methodology (Ghiglione,  
88 1980) was used to analyze the text material col-  
89 lected; the statistical program Alceste 4.6 (Ana-  
90 lyze de Lexèmes Cooccurrents dans les Enoncés  
91 Simples d'un Texte – by Reinert, 1987) was also  
92 used to obtain the most frequently used words and  
93 the internal organization of the discourse.

## 94 Result

95 The data gathered indicate that volunteers  
96 (women and men) need organizational rules and  
97 ► norms oriented toward encouraging them to  
98 participate in all organizational roles, including  
99 leadership and management roles. If voluntary  
100 associations do not adopt flexible rules and set-  
101 tings, they risk failure: voluntary associations  
102 need to create an atmosphere that is more able  
103 to accommodate everybody's needs. Participants  
104 reported that managerial and leadership roles are  
105 assigned both on the basis of men's and women's  
106 views about who should assume such roles and on  
107 the type of work that the voluntary association  
108 does. Many women (generally aged >55 years)

109 actually prefer men to hold certain roles that they  
110 associate more with males, such as money man-  
111 agement or group leadership. Voluntary associa-  
112 tions could have an important function in  
113 changing this type of mentality, by giving  
114 women (of all ages) a chance to try their hand at  
115 these roles. As for the type of work engaged in by  
116 the voluntary association, as Eagly's work has  
117 shown (Eagly & Carli, 2007), leadership is – at  
118 least in Italy – still linked to expectations regard-  
119 ing ► gender roles. Voluntary associations are  
120 not exempt from the social and cultural processes  
121 at work elsewhere. The data from this investiga-  
122 tion indicate that women are more likely to be  
123 chosen as leaders in women's volunteer groups,  
124 where their behavior more closely reflects gender  
125 stereotypes and the association's values and  
126 norms (see Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky,  
127 1992). Data gathered during the interviews con-  
128 firm this rule: an increase in the number of men in  
129 an association could disrupt the group's equilib-  
130 rium. That equilibrium can be restored by  
131 redistributing assignments, but new assignments  
132 could penalize women's leadership and manage-  
133 rial roles in order to preserve the stereotype that  
134 fosters their participation and inclusion (Martin,  
135 2003). From the literature and data gathered, it  
136 emerges that an association's norms and values  
137 are the crucial elements that determine which of  
138 the volunteer group members are singled out for  
139 roles as leaders and managers. The leader in  
140 particular is required to guarantee and preside  
141 over not only the association's mission but also  
142 its vision, so that its specific character can be  
143 perpetuated. The vision is perpetuated through  
144 recognition for work done. In particular, ceremo-  
145 nies contain rites and rituals that reinforce the  
146 type of conduct for which volunteers are symbol-  
147 ically rewarded (e.g., with medals). The goal is to  
148 build a sense of belonging to the group, and this is  
149 essential for volunteers because it strengthens the  
150 processes of inclusion and participation (Farmer  
151 & Fedor, 2003), enabling members to express  
152 themselves and feel welcome, accepted, to take  
153 on responsibilities, to try their hand at new roles.

154 **Discussion**

155 So, how is it possible to support women to enable  
156 them to express their potential within voluntary  
157 associations? The answer is to be found in the  
158 commitment of their members to remove obsta-  
159 cles to women's participation, to establish norms  
160 to welcome and integrate diversity, and to help  
161 balance the demands that a dual presence in the  
162 workplace and the domestic sphere can entail.  
163 Women of all ages (but also most of the men in  
164 our investigation) wanted voluntary associations  
165 to remove all barriers to participation, including  
166 problems involved in balancing an individual's  
167 many responsibilities (e.g., work or school and  
168 family).

169 Voluntary associations – like all for-profit and  
170 not-for-profit organizations – could benefit from  
171 greater diversity in gender (but also in age,  
172 knowledge, skills, ethnicity, and so on) first in  
173 their members and consequently in the people  
174 who occupy managerial and leadership roles.  
175 This could have a positive impact on life within  
176 the association and result, for example, in more  
177 time being dedicated to the decision-making pro-  
178 cess and more new ideas about how to acquire  
179 resources (fund-raising and/or recruiting more  
180 volunteers) (Hackman, 2002). Greater diversity  
181 among members could enable each volunteer to  
182 improve the ways in which they participate, not  
183 only in the activities of voluntary associations but  
184 also in for-profit organizations: if good relation-  
185 ships are established, this approach could be an  
186 example for all organizations to follow. Thus,  
187 voluntary associations are being asked to devote  
188 more attention to each individual's skills, desires,  
189 and ► **capabilities** and to bear in mind that all  
190 volunteers have the right to aspire to lead the  
191 life they can and want to lead (Singh, 2002).  
192 What could voluntary association leaders do?  
193 First, they need to reflect on the association's  
194 mission and vision, the effect of these on the  
195 association's norms and values, the type of  
196 ► **decision-making processes** adopted by the  
197 group, and the resulting efforts to provide support  
198 and closure. This reflection is also essential if the  
199 association is to survive. Volunteers – both men  
200 and women – describe the failure of the process  
201 of inclusion and participation as one of the factors

202 that cause voluntary associations to fall apart. In  
203 such cases, change must necessarily come from  
204 within the organization. Moreover, from the data  
205 gathered, it emerged that voluntary associations  
206 that do not adopt norms and values oriented  
207 toward acceptance and involvement put their  
208 own survival at risk: members could move to  
209 another association or set up their own associa-  
210 tion in which the rules and settings are more  
211 oriented toward participation, flexibility, and  
212 inclusiveness. This process is not possible in  
213 for-profit organizations, whereas in voluntary  
214 associations, people are not bound by formal  
215 contracts but by emotional and affective ties and  
216 by their own sense of responsibility, so they can  
217 choose to leave the association and voluntary  
218 activities, change the association from within  
219 (e.g., by becoming a leader), or create one of  
220 their own (alone or with other members of the  
221 same association). Change could prove particu-  
222 larly constructive for women: after gaining expe-  
223 rience with one association, they could create  
224 another more suited to their needs and explore  
225 new roles. Essentially, if a voluntary association  
226 is unable to meet the current needs of people (and  
227 society), it is destined to fail. This process carries  
228 the risk of fragmentation, a phenomenon that is  
229 already present in the Italian context: in 2003, for  
230 each organization that closed down, more than 10  
231 new ones were registered (ISTAT, 2005). New  
232 organizations could adopt a different vision,  
233 a strategy that fosters inclusion and participation  
234 of women and young people, who are the future  
235 of volunteer work. And this could create  
236 a virtuous circle: if volunteering is satisfying,  
237 the voluntary association is more likely to attract  
238 new people who can contribute to fueling its  
239 mission and vision (Mattsson & Stenbacka,  
240 2003): the data obtained indicate that one of the  
241 major channels through which people access vol-  
242 unteer work is that of friends and acquaintances  
243 who promote the voluntary association on the  
244 basis of their experience with it. Therefore,  
245 a very important aspect that emerged from the  
246 interviews is the birth of the association, the  
247 moment when the founders declare its mission  
248 and vision; the rules, norms, and values shared by  
249 all members; and the ability of members to

250 comply with these. Furthermore, when women  
 251 set up a new association, they must have a role  
 252 in proposing and stimulating change toward an  
 253 organizational style and climate that is more in  
 254 line with their needs and desires. This process  
 255 could be difficult, as men and women who have  
 256 experienced failure could repeat the same orga-  
 257 nizational mistake. In the interviews, some vol-  
 258 unteers expressed the need to understand which  
 259 organizational models are best suited to women  
 260 and how these can be adapted to voluntary asso-  
 261 ciation contexts. Voluntary associations show  
 262 considerable promise as laboratories for testing  
 263 different organizational forms, as this investiga-  
 264 tion indicates that voluntary associations are  
 265 potentially more easily adaptable to suit their  
 266 member's needs.

267 **Cross-References**

268 ► [Participation in Civil Society](#)

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