

Volunteering and gender: changes during the COVID-19 pandemic

This factsheet compares data collected in 2020 and 2021 to data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data in the General Social Survey (GSS) 2019 was collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) between 29th April and 20th June 2019, and data in the GSS 2020 was collected between 15th June and 5th September 2020. The GSS 2020 is the most recent publication, and can be found [here](#).

The Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey was a series of monthly surveys conducted between August 2020 and June 2021, which collected data on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lifestyle and wellbeing of Australians. The timeseries release includes data on volunteering collected between December 2020 and June 2021, and a detailed module on unpaid voluntary work was included in the March 2021 survey. The final release can be found [here](#).

To complement this data, Volunteering Australia commissioned the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods to include a module on volunteering in three waves of the ANUPoll survey. This data was collected in August – December 2019, April 2020, and April 2021. An open-ended question, which invited volunteers to comment on how volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic affected their life in general, was included in the April 2021 survey.

Volunteering Australia's definition of volunteering is "time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain." This document deploys this definition and hence includes information on formal and informal volunteering. The ABS defines 'formal volunteering' as unpaid voluntary work through an organisation and 'informal volunteering' as the provision of unpaid work/support to non-family members outside of the household.

Volunteering Australia acknowledges that the surveys used to collect the data presented here are not inclusive of the diversity of gender identities in our community. This document uses the terms 'woman/female' and 'man/male' to denote those who have selected 'female' or 'male' respectively as their sex in their response to the survey. Volunteering Australia recognises that only those who identify as female or male are represented in these statistics.

Note: *Throughout this document, estimates marked with a '#' have a high margin of error and should be used with caution.*

Key findings

- 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.
 - Throughout the pandemic, women were more likely than men to volunteer formally on a weekly basis.
 - The rate of formal volunteering has been consistently lower after March 2020 than it was before.
 - 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.

- The types of organisations for which people volunteered changed significantly in 2020, with major differences in the proportions of women and men in some types of organisations compared to previous years.
 - While women volunteered for ‘parenting, children and youth’ organisations at a significantly higher rate than men did in 2019 (16.4 per cent compared to 9.3 per cent), this difference is much smaller in 2020, at 9.2 per cent among women and 7.0 per cent among men. Also, while women and men volunteered for ‘education and training’ organisations at similar rates in 2019, women (24.4 per cent) volunteered for these organisations at a much higher rate than men (12.1 per cent) in 2020.
- Informal volunteering was less strongly affected by the pandemic, decreasing slightly among women (from 33.9 per cent in 2019 to 31.8 per cent in 2020), and remaining steady among men (32.6 per cent in 2019 and 32.4 per cent in 2020). However, some gendered effects are observed, for example:
 - The proportion of women who provided ‘domestic work, home maintenance or gardening’ and ‘any unpaid child care’ decreased more significantly in 2020 than the proportion of men providing these forms of unpaid work and support.
 - The proportion of men who provided ‘transport or running errands’ and ‘any teaching, coaching or practical advice’ decreased more significantly in 2020 than the proportion of women providing these forms of unpaid work and support.
 - The proportion of women and men ‘providing any emotional support’ increased in 2020, though this increase was more significant among women.
- 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 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).

Rates of volunteering

The rate of formal volunteering in Australia has been declining steadily among women and men over time. For people aged 18 years and over, the rate has declined from 36.2 per cent in 2010 to 28.8 per cent in 2019.¹ Over this period, the decline is most evident for women, with the proportion of women who volunteer decreasing from 38.1 per cent in 2010 to 28.1 per cent in 2019.² This changed slightly in 2020, with GSS data indicating a more significant decline for males than for females between 2019 and 2020.

- The proportion of women who volunteer in Australia fell from 28.5 per cent in 2019 to 26.3 per cent in 2020. The proportion of men who volunteer fell from 30.7 per cent to 23.1 per cent.

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/volunteers>

² <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/latest-release>

Proportion of people who volunteer formally, by age and sex, 2019 and 2020

Age group	2019		2020	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
15-24	#30.1	#34.2	18.5	20.7
25-39	23.7	27.6	24.6	17.5
40-54	36.4	36.8	31.0	28.9
55-69	27.7	31.5	26.6	23.2
70 years and over	25.6	23.3	27.4	29.3
Total persons	28.5	30.7	26.3	23.1

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2020) 'Table 3.3: Persons aged 15 years and over, Social Experiences—By Age and Sex, proportion of persons [data set], General Social Survey, Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) 'Table 2.3: Persons aged 15 years and over, Social Experiences—By Sex and Health Characteristics, proportion of persons [data set], General Social Survey, Australia

- Throughout the pandemic, women were more likely than men to volunteer formally on a weekly basis.

Proportion of people who volunteered one or more times a week in the last four weeks, by sex, 2020 and 2021

Sex	Before 1 March 2020	December 2020	February 2021	April 2021	June 2021
Female	13.7	8.2	8.6	9.2	8.5
Male	9.4	7.0	7.5	7.6	6.1

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (July 2021) 'Table 26.1: Persons aged 18 years and over, Frequency of activities, by sex, and age, Time series: Proportion' [data set], Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, Australia

- The proportion of women who volunteer informally fell slightly in 2020 (from 33.9 per cent to 31.8 per cent), while the proportion of men who volunteer informally remained steady (32.6 per cent in 2019 and 32.4 per cent in 2020).
 - Among people aged 15-24, both women and men were less likely to volunteer informally in 2020.
 - Women aged 55-69 and 70 years and over were less likely to volunteer informally in 2020 than in 2019, while men in these age groups were more likely to volunteer informally in 2020 than in 2019.

Proportion of people who volunteer informally, by age and sex, 2019 and 2020

Age group	2019		2020	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
15-24	33.9	#39.0	28.9	25.1
25-39	39.8	37.1	39.7	39.0
40-54	33.2	33.9	34.3	31.8
55-69	28.6	25.7	26.1	32.8
70 years and over	28.0	27.1	23.3	29.5
Total persons	33.9	32.6	31.8	32.4

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2020) 'Table 3.3: Persons aged 15 years and over, Social Experiences—By Age and Sex, proportion of persons [data set], General Social Survey, Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) 'Table 2.3: Persons aged 15 years and over, Social Experiences—By Sex and Health Characteristics, proportion of persons [data set], General Social Survey, Australia

Time spent volunteering

- In 2019, women (43.0 per cent) were more likely than men (32.9 per cent) to have volunteered for more than 10 years.
- In 2020, men (43.5 per cent) were more likely than women (41.0 per cent) to have volunteered for more than 10 years. While the number of men who volunteered for 10 years or more remained steady between 2019 and 2020, the number of women who volunteered for 10 years or more decreased from 1.247 million to 1.115 million. This indicates that the impact of the pandemic on long-term volunteers was stronger among women than men.

Years spent volunteering formally, by sex, 2019 and 2020

Years volunteered	2019		2020	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
Less than one year	11.0	19.3	9.9	9.3
One to five years	35.9	34.8	36.9	36.5
Six to nine years	10.8	10.5	11.6	10.1
Ten years or more	43.0	32.9	41.0	43.5

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2020) 'Table 8.3: Persons aged 15 years and over who have undertaken unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in last 12 months, Characteristics of voluntary work—By Sex, proportion of persons' [data set], General Social Survey, Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) 'Table 10.3: Persons aged 15 years and over who have undertaken unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in last 12 months, Characteristics of voluntary work—By Sex, proportion of persons' [data set], General Social Survey, Australia

- Hours spent volunteering were largely consistent between 2019 and 2020, though a slightly larger proportion of people volunteered for more than 20 hours. This change was similar among women and men.

Annual hours spent volunteering formally, by sex, 2019 and 2020

Hours spent	2019		2020	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
1 – 20 hours	40.9	42.2	38.2	37.6
21 to 99 hours	30.8	29.0	32.3	36.5
100 hours or more	29.1	27.0	29.3	26.7

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2020) 'Table 9.3 Persons aged 15 years and over who have undertaken unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in last 12 months, Annual hours—By Age and Sex, proportion of persons' [data set], General Social Survey, Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) 'Table 11.3: Persons aged 15 years and over who have undertaken unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in last 12 months, Annual hours—By Age and Sex, proportion of persons' [data set], General Social Survey, Australia³

Nature of organisations and activities

- A greater proportion of women volunteered for 'education and training' organisations in 2020 than in 2019 (24.4 per cent compared to 21.2 per cent), while a smaller proportion

³ Breakdowns by age and gender are not presented due to high margins of error for these figures

volunteered for ‘parenting, children and youth organisations’ (9.2 per cent compared to 16.4 per cent).

- A greater proportion of men volunteered for ‘business/professional/union’ organisations in 2020 than in 2019 (6.8 per cent compared to 3.3 per cent), while a smaller proportion volunteered for ‘education and training’ organisations (12.1 per cent compared to 21.2 per cent).
- While women volunteered for ‘parenting, children and youth’ organisations at a significantly higher rate than men did in 2019 (16.4 per cent compared to 9.3 per cent), this difference is much smaller in 2020, at 9.2 per cent among women and 7.0 per cent among men. Also, while women and men volunteered for ‘education and training’ organisations at similar rates in 2019, women (24.4 per cent) volunteered for these organisations at a much higher rate than men (12.1 per cent) in 2020.
- Both women and men volunteered for ‘community/ethnic groups’ at higher rates (15.7 per cent compared to 11.6 per cent) and for ‘sport and physical recreation’ organisations at lower rates (30.7 per cent compared to 39.1 per cent) in 2020 than in 2019.

Type of organisations volunteered for, by sex, 2019 and 2020

Type of organisation	2019			2020		
	Females	Males	Persons	Females	Males	Persons
Arts/Heritage	6.4	4.7	5.1	6.1	4.5	5.6
Business/Professional/Union	2.1	3.3	2.5	2.5	6.8	4.3
Community/Ethnic groups	13.1	9.2	11.6	17.7	14.1	15.7
Education and Training	21.2	21.7	21.8	24.4	12.1	18.8
Parenting, children and youth	16.4	9.3	12.3	9.2	7.0	8.0
Emergency services	3.6	7.2	4.7	3.7	6.6	4.9
Environment/Animal welfare	4.8	5.8	6.0	5.2	4.6	5.0
International Aid/Development	2.3	1.1	1.8	2.7	1.0	1.7
Health/Welfare	15.6	7.1	11.6	13.6	9.8	12.1
Law/Justice/Political	1.2	1.3	1.0	1.8	3.1	2.7
Religious	21.8	24.3	23.3	22.4	25.1	23.1
Sport and physical recreation	30.5	47.5	39.1	25.1	37.8	30.7
Other	7.9	7.4	8.1	9.2	8.1	8.7

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2020) 'Table 8.3: Persons aged 15 years and over who have undertaken unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in last 12 months, Characteristics of voluntary work—By Sex, proportion of persons' [data set], General Social Survey, Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) 'Table 10.3: Persons aged 15 years and over who have undertaken unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in last 12 months, Characteristics of voluntary work—By Sex, proportion of persons' [data set], General Social Survey, Australia

Note: Significant changes between 2019 and 2020 are highlighted in the table above, with green text denoting an increased proportion in 2020 and red text denoting a decreased proportion. Totals add up to more than 100% as people volunteer for more than one type of organisation.

Informal volunteering

- The proportion of women who provided ‘domestic work, home maintenance or gardening’ and ‘any unpaid child care’ to non-household members decreased more significantly in 2020 than the proportion of men providing these forms of unpaid work and support.
- The proportion of men who provided ‘transport or running errands’ and ‘any teaching, coaching or practical advice’ to non-household members decreased more significantly in 2020 than the proportion of women providing these forms of unpaid work and support.
- The proportion of women and men ‘providing any emotional support’ to non-household members increased in 2020, though this increase was more significant among women.

Type of unpaid work/support provided, by sex, 2019 and 2020

Type of unpaid work/support provided	2019			2020		
	Females	Males	Persons	Females	Males	Persons
Domestic work, home maintenance or gardening	36.1	49.3	41.9	28.3	46.9	37.2
Providing transport or running errands	40.9	44.5	42.4	38.5	38.2	38.2
Any unpaid child care	29.1	15.6	23.0	23.9	13.2	18.9
Any teaching, coaching or practical advice	13.0	22.1	17.2	12.1	13.7	12.8
Providing any emotional support	59.4	40.5	50.5	64.0	42.7	53.8
Personal care/assistance	16.4	13.1	14.9	17.6	10.2	14.1
Lobbying/advocacy	2.8	2.4	2.9	2.6	1.8	2.2
Community assistance	4.7	6.1	5.0	2.9	4.6	4.0
Environmental Protection	2.0	3.2	2.5	0.9	1.1	1.0
Any other help	5.6	6.1	6.2	7.7	10.2	9.1

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2020) ‘Table 10.3 Persons aged 15 years and over who provided unpaid work/support to non-household members in last 4 weeks, Characteristics of unpaid work/support–By Sex, proportion of persons’ [data set], General Social Survey, Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) ‘Table 13.3 Persons aged 15 years and over who provided unpaid work/support to non-household members in last 4 weeks, Characteristics of unpaid work/support–By Sex, proportion of persons’ [data set], General Social Survey, Australia

Note: Significant changes between 2019 and 2020 are highlighted in the table above, with green text denoting an increased proportion in 2020 and red text denoting a decreased proportion. Totals add up to more than 100% as people reported providing more than one type of unpaid work/support

- The number of hours spent volunteering informally decreased slightly among both women and men in 2020.

Annual hours spent volunteering informally, by sex, 2019 and 2020

Hours spent	2019		2020	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
1 – 20 hours	84.8	89.1	86.4	92.7
21 hours or more	14.6	11.3	13.6	6.9

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2020) ‘Table 11.3 Persons aged 15 years and over who provided unpaid work/support to non-household members in last 4 weeks, Hours in last 4 weeks–By Age and Sex, proportion of persons’ [data set], General Social Survey, Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) ‘Table 14.3 Persons aged 15 years

and over who provided unpaid work/support to non-household members in last 4 weeks, Hours in last 4 weeks—By Age and Sex, proportion of persons' [data set], General Social Survey, Australia

Nature of volunteering experience

- When asked to describe how volunteering during COVID-19 impacted their life in general, women were slightly more likely to report negative or neutral themes, while men were more likely to indicate no change.

Proportion of qualitative responses by theme, by sex, 2021

Gender	Positive	Negative	Neutral	No change
<i>Male</i>	34.6	10.4	21.4	33.5
<i>Female</i>	33.8	19.7	26.2	20.3

Source: Biddle, Nicholas, 2021, "ANU Poll 46 (April 2021): Vaccination, Stress and Unemployment during COVID 19", doi:10.26193/BC2QE8, ADA Dataverse, V2⁴

Gender and COVID-19

The data presented above indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant influence on the ways that volunteering activity varies by gender.

Some of the changes in the data between 2019 and 2020 might be explained by differences in the types of volunteering undertaken by women and men. For example, roles undertaken by women may have been less affected by lockdowns. This might be because more of these roles could be done remotely or because they supported the delivery of essential services, such as food relief and domestic violence support, which continued to operate during the pandemic. However, it is not possible to know whether this is the case without data which provides greater detail on the type of volunteering activities undertaken by women and men.

Patterns of paid work and unpaid domestic work have also been affected in different ways for women and men during the pandemic. The most significant differences have been:

- Women were more likely than men to have lost jobs and paid work hours during lockdowns.
 - At the peak of the first lockdown in April, almost 8 per cent of Australian women had lost their jobs, and women's total hours worked were down 12 per cent. Among men in Australia, 4 per cent had lost their jobs and total hours worked were down 7 per cent.⁵
 - A higher proportion of women work in sectors which have been heavily restricted by lockdowns and other public health measures, such as hospitality, and arts and recreation.

⁴ Qualitative data coded in: McDermott, J (2021), *Continuity and change: volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic*, <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Continuity-and-change-volunteering-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

⁵ <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Womens-work-Grattan-Institute-report.pdf>, 3

- Women are more likely to be in part-time and casual work, which experienced more significant proportional declines in work hours.⁶
- Female dominant industries were less likely to offer telecommuting/remote working (89 per cent) compared to male dominant (95 per cent) and mixed industries (94 per cent).⁷
- Women were less likely to have received government support during the pandemic.
 - Income support measures, such as JobKeeper, disadvantage casual and part-time work arrangements, in which women are overrepresented. According to the Treasury JobKeeper review, 53 per cent of recipients were men and 47 per cent women.⁸
 - Stimulus policies have targeted male dominant sectors, particularly construction.⁹
- Women took on a higher proportion of unpaid domestic work, including childcare, during lockdowns.
 - According to the Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, women were twice as likely as men to report that they did most of the unpaid domestic work (80 per cent compared to 39 per cent) and more than three times as likely to report that they did most of the unpaid caring responsibilities (38 per cent compared to 11 per cent) in their household.¹⁰

Given these changes, the simultaneous changes in patterns of volunteering among men and women revealed in the data presented above may have been influenced by:

- *Reductions in paid work.* As women lost more hours of paid work than men did during the pandemic, they may have found it easier to continue volunteering through an organisation or group.
- *The expectation that women provide a greater proportion of unpaid work.* Women may have faced greater pressure to continue in their voluntary roles than men. This increased sense of pressure may also explain why women who were more likely to report negative volunteering experiences than men during the pandemic.
- *Increased domestic responsibilities.* While women previously volunteered more for 'parenting, children and youth' organisations, and provided more informal domestic help and childcare to non-household members, increased responsibilities at home may have taken priority during the pandemic.

However, more detailed analysis on the role of volunteering in the lives of volunteers, and on changing motivations to volunteer, will be needed to explain these trends with greater detail and clarity.

⁶ <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Womens-work-Grattan-Institute-report.pdf>, 12

⁷ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/flexible-work-post-covid> (accessed 1 March 2022)

⁸ https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/jobkeeper-review-2020_0.pdf, 42

⁹ <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Womens-work-Grattan-Institute-report.pdf>, 32

¹⁰ <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Womens-work-Grattan-Institute-report.pdf>, 18

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