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ABSTRACT

Decreased civic and political participation is a pressing problem in the United States. Today, Americans are less likely to vote, work for a party or candidate, attend a meeting, or belong to a social or community organization than they were 40 years ago. A study used the Community Indicators Survey, a nationally representative sample of 1,206 adults conducted by telephone in 1999, to measure levels of community involvement. The study suggests that gender plays an important role in determining who participates; women choose to participate, or not to, for different reasons than men. Factors influencing civic engagement include the following: (1) more highly educated men, but not women, are more likely to participate; (2) women who feel safe in their neighborhoods are more likely to participate, but men who feel safe are less likely to participate; (3) knowing one's neighbors also increases participation significantly among women but not men; (4) family income of more than $60,000 increases participation significantly for women, but not for men; and (5) the only factor with a similar effect on men and women is that having a child between the ages of 5 and 17 increases participation for both genders. The study concluded that public policies that decrease violence and increase safety for women and better work-family policies could increase civic participation. Community and other civic groups could also encourage activism by making participation more convenient by providing child care, scheduling events at the end of workdays or at worksites, or using e-mail to build networks or even as a medium of participation. (KC)

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Women's Community Involvement: The Effects of Money, Safety, Parenthood, and Friends. Research-in-Brief.

Amy Caiazza

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Research-in-Brief

IWPR Publication #C346

September 2001

Women's Community Involvement:
The Effects of Money, Safety, Parenthood, and Friends

By Amy Caiazza, Ph.D.

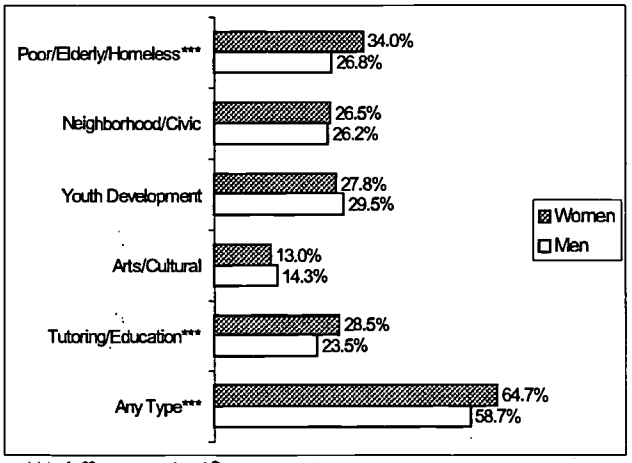
Decreased civic and political participation is a pressing problem in our country. Today, Americans are less likely to vote, work for a party or candidate, or attend a political meeting than they were 40 years ago. They belong to fewer social and community organizations and attend fewer meetings. As a result, Americans have many fewer "ties that bind;" hence, they lack the crucial "social capital" that contributes to building safe and healthy communities.

This Research-in-Brief suggests that gender plays an important role in determining who participates in the United States. Women choose to participate, or not to, for different reasons than men. Efforts to increase civic participation by both sexes need to take these differences into account if levels of civic and political participation are to increase in America.

Gender Difference in Civic Participation

Women are more likely to participate in civic organizations than men, and men and women are involved in different types of civic activities and organizations (see Figure 1).[1] For some activities, including neighborhood or civic groups, youth development programs, and arts or cultural groups, men and women participate at similar rates. Women, however, are more likely to participate in two kinds of activities: 1) programs for the poor, elderly, or homeless; and 2) tutoring or other educational programs.

Figure 1: Civic Involvement Among Men and Women



*** differences significant at .01

Overall, approximately one-third or fewer of all men and women participate in any single type of activity. About 65 percent of women and 59 percent of men participate in some kind of activity.

Factors Affecting Civic Engagement

Why are men and women engaged in civic activism—and why aren't they? By answering this question, community leaders can motivate men and women to become involved, and stay involved, in civic activism.

Many factors affect levels of civic engagement (see Table 1). Workers are much more likely to participate than non-workers. Married people are slightly more likely to participate than those who were never married. Participation increases substantially with education and income. Whites and Blacks are both slightly more likely to participate than people of other races. Participation is much higher among homeowners than renters.

[1] To analyze men's and women's civic participation, IWPR used the national sample of the Community Indicators Survey, a data set developed by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to measure levels of community involvement, concern for a variety of issues and problems, and other aspects of civic health in 26 communities and the nation (the Knight Foundation works to improve the quality of life in 26 U.S. communities where the Knight brothers owned newspapers). The national survey, which encompasses a nationally representative sample of 1,206 adults 18 and over, was conducted by telephone in fall of 1999. To measure civic engagement, IWPR used survey questions asking whether individuals spent time volunteering for various kinds of programs or groups during the year preceding the survey.

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A few of the findings in Table 1 are worth emphasizing. First, people with children aged 5 to 17 participate at much higher rates than people with younger children or no children at all. This suggests that people with older children have an increased stake in the community or other resources that allow them to be engaged.

Safety also affects levels of civic engagement. People who feel safe are much more likely to participate than those who do not. In addition, how well a person knows his or her neighbors affects engagement. People who know more of their neighbors are much more likely to participate than those who know fewer.

The Relative Effects of Factors Predicting Civic Engagement

What, though, are the relative effects of each of the factors in Table 1 on men's and women's civic participation? IWPR research points to some important findings about the factors that influence civic engagement (see Table 2):

- For men, education plays a stronger role in predicting civic participation than it does for women. Having some college or a college diploma significantly increases men's, but not women's, civic engagement.
- For women, safety plays a very different role than it does for men. Feeling safe in one's neighborhood increases the likelihood of participation for women, but it decreases participation among men.
- Knowing one's neighbors also increases participation significantly among women but not men.
- For women, income also plays a role in predicting engagement. A family income of more than $60,000 increases women's participation significantly. In contrast, income is not a significant factor for men.
- The only factor with a similar effect on both men's and women's civic participation is having a child between the age of 5 and 17. This increases civic engagement for men and women.

Parental Status: Increasing One's Stake in the Community

Men and women are both more likely to participate if they have children aged 5-17. Why? Men and women with children have an increased stake in their communities' education and youth programs, economic development, arts, economic security, and overall civic health.

In contrast, if parents have children under five, they are not more likely to participate, despite an increase stake in their communities' health. Why not? When children are very young, parents' lack of time and energy can make it more difficult for them to participate. Issues of child care also pose a significant

Table 1. Levels of Civic Participation by Different Characteristics

	Percentage Participating
Employment Status* **	
Full-Time	65.7%
Part-Time	65.3%
Retired	54.4%
Not employed	47.1%
Marital Status* **	
Married or living as married	62.8%
Widowed	60.0%
Divorced	62.5%
Never married	60.5%
Parental Status* **	
No children	58.6%
Children under 5	60.8%
Children 5 to 17	71.1%
Education Level* **	
Less than high school	46.7%
High school	55.9%
Some college	67.5%
College and post-graduate	74.1%
Race* **	
White	62.0%
Black	61.9%
Other	57.1%
Income* **	
Less than $30,000	55.9%
$30,000 to under $60,000	61.2%
$60,000 and above	75.3%
Home Ownership* **	
Own	65.0%
Rent	56.9%
Level of Perceived Safety	
*In one's neighborhood:***	
Very safe	65.1%
Somewhat safe	61.7%
Not too safe/not at all safe	53.1%
*Downtown:***	
Very safe	67.5%
Somewhat safe	65.4%
Not too safe/not at all safe	51.5%
Knowing Neighbors* **	
Know all	71.3%
Know some	58.7%
Don't know any	50.5%

*** differences significant at .001

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Table 2. Logistic Regressions of Civic Participation by Sex: Coefficients

	Women	Men
Safe in neighborhood	0.82 **	-0.78 *
Safe downtown	0.38	0.50
Know neighbors	0.75 **	0.19
Homeowner	-0.07	0.11
Rural	-0.06	0.16
Suburb	-0.10	0.04
Work	0.10	0.13
Married	-0.56	-0.05
Child under 5	-0.36	0.01
Child 5-17	0.71 **	0.66 **
High school educated	0.02	0.68
Some college	0.54	1.00 **
College degree	0.70	1.44 ***
White (1)	-0.52 *	-0.11
Age	-0.08	0.00
Age squared	0.00	0.00
Income level 2 (2)	0.16	0.17
Income level 3 (2)	1.29 ***	0.17
constant	0.66	-0.41
R squared	0.11	0.10
N	454	462

* significant at .10 ** significant at .05 *** significant at .01

(1) For the purposes of this model, "white" serves as a contrast with "black and other." Because of limitations in the data, we could not compare whites with both blacks and other races and ethnicities.

(2) Income level 2 encompasses individuals in families with incomes from $30,000 to under $60,000 per year. Income level 3 includes individuals in families with incomes of $60,000 and more per year.

problem for these parents, especially for activities held in the evening.

To illustrate the effects of parental status on civic engagement, imagine a 30-year-old, white, urban, married worker who has some college education and a family income over $30,000 and under $60,000. For both a man and woman with these characteristics, having a child aged 5 to 17 increases the likelihood of being engaged in the community by nearly half.

Knowing One's Neighbor: The "Bumping into Each Other" Process

Knowing one's neighbor is another factor that predicts civic engagement among women and not men. Why? The answer lies in differences in women's responsibilities and patterns of behavior.

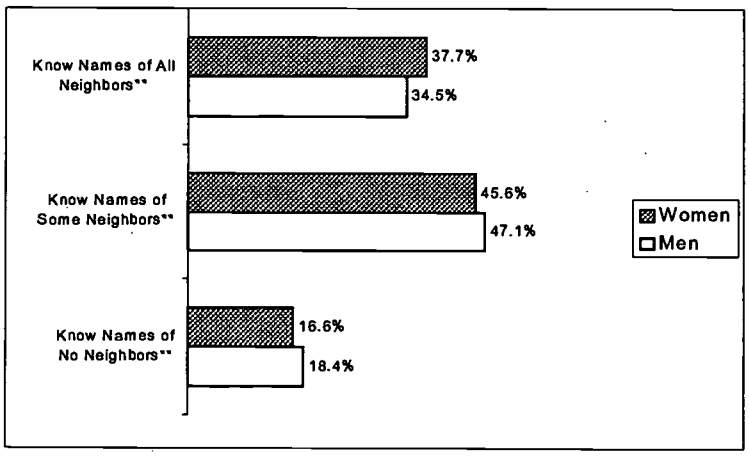
Because men are more likely to be part of the workforce, they are also more likely to be recruited for civic activities through contacts and networks based in the workplace. In contrast, women's recruitment to civic activism often comes from other kinds of experiences.

As women, both in the workforce and not, tend to their family responsibilities, they build informal networks with other women whose responsibilities lead to similar daily schedules and patterns of activity. On the streets of their neighborhoods, in doctors' offices, and at schools, women talk with one another about their common problems and obstacles. These conversations inspire them to activism. Even when women have networks resembling men's workplace-based contacts, they may also be moved to participate through their informal, neighborhood-based, women-centered networks.

Women's different patterns of behavior are evident in the fact that women are more likely to know their neighbors than men are. As Figure 2 indicates, 37.7 percent of women, compared with 34.5 percent of men, claim to know all of their neighbors. This indirectly measures whether women and men "bump into" their neighbors informally while going about their daily business.

Table 2 indicates that knowing one's neighbor is also more closey related to women's civic engagement than men's. To illustrate this difference, take the following example: a 30-year-old, white, urban, married worker who has a child between the ages of 5 and 17, some college education, and a family income over $30,000 and under $60,000. For a man with these characteristics, knowing his neighbors increases participation by about 20 percent. For a woman, it does so by 40 percent.

Figure 2: Knowing One's Neighbors



** differences significant at .05

Table 3. Safety among Men and Women			
Safety at Night		Women	Men
Walking in Neighborhood***	Very Safe	43.8%	59.5%
	Somewhat Safe	34.5%	29.4%
	Not Too Safe	12.6%	6.2%
	Not at All Safe	4.5%	2.3%
	Don't Know/Refused	4.7%	0.0%
Downtown***	Very Safe	27.0%	36.3%
	Somewhat Safe	36.2%	38.5%
	Not Too Safe	17.0%	11.7%
	Not at All Safe	10.2%	5.7%
	Don't Know/Refused	9.6%	7.8%

*** differences significant at .001

Table 4. Seriousness of Problems for Men and Women			
How much of a problem is...		Women	Men
Too many unsupervised children/teens?***	Big problem	30.0%	25.7%
	Small problem	30.1%	34.6%
	Not a problem	36.4%	37.2%
Not enough affordable housing?***	Big problem	28.5%	20.4%
	Small problem	28.1%	31.4%
	Not a problem	38.0%	44.2%
Crime?***	Big problem	28.2%	24.1%
	Small problem	42.9%	43.8%
	Not a problem	26.3%	31.1%
People not involved in community?*	Big problem	26.3%	25.0%
	Small problem	35.7%	37.2%
	Not a problem	34.0%	32.5%
Affordable/quality child care?***	Big problem	25.3%	13.5%
	Small problem	24.3%	27.8%
	Not a problem	33.4%	40.3%
Not enough arts/cultural activities?***	Big problem	21.2%	17.3%
	Small problem	23.6%	30.3%
	Not a problem	49.8%	45.4%
Unemployment?**	Big problem	18.0%	15.1%
	Small problem	35.5%	38.0%
	Not a problem	40.3%	41.3%
Quality of public school education?*	Big problem	16.3%	14.3%
	Small problem	23.3%	23.8%
	Not a problem	52.0%	54.8%

Note: figures do not add up to 100 percent because respondents who refused or did not know are excluded.

*differences significant at .01 **differences significant at .05 ***differences significant at .001

Personal Safety: A Potential Obstacle to Participation

Perceived safety is also of particular importance to women's civic engagement. Table 3 shows the proportion of women and men who report feeling safe and unsafe from crime in their neighborhoods and downtown areas at night. Among men, 8.5 percent feel unsafe in their neighborhood. Twice as many women, over 17 percent, say the same thing. Similarly, 17.4 percent of men and 27.2 percent of women report feeling unsafe downtown at night.

Fear of violence could easily dampen women's civic participation. Civic activities often require that citizens be out and about in their communities, especially at night. If women fear violence, they may be less likely to engage in those activities. If they feel relatively safe, they may be more likely to. As Table 2 shows, women who feel safe are more likely to be civically engaged.

In contrast, men who feel safe are less likely to participate. This suggests either that a lack of safety is not an obstacle to engagement in the way it is for women or that it can cause men to take action to increase levels of safety.

Again, consider a white, urban, married, 30-year-old worker with a child between 5 and 17, some college education, and a family income over $30,000 and under $60,000. For a woman in this category, feeling safe increases the likelihood of being engaged in the community by about three-fourths. For a man, feeling safe decreases it slightly, by about 3 percent.

Because the importance of safety to civic engagement stands up to controls for race, income, education, and area of residence, for women in all kinds of neighborhoods and across socioeconomic status, safety is an important political and civic concern.

Women's Participation and Public Policy

Our findings point strongly to the need for policies that decrease violence and increase safety for women. For example, efforts to recruit, hire, and train more female police and court officials, as well as to train all officials about issues concerning gender-based violence, could increase women's safety and bring government and law-enforcement a more gender-sensitive approach and look.

Our findings also point to the need for better work-family policies: paid family leave, adequate and affordable child care, and flexible work schedules. Since parents with school-age children are more likely to participate, being a parent probably inspires a propensity to participate. But a lack of adequate work-family policies has put working parents in a time crunch. Subsequently, given more time, they might participate more. In particular, parents of young children would benefit from these policies.

Community and other civic groups could also encourage activism by making participation more convenient for men and women: providing child care; scheduling events at the end of workdays or even at worksites; or using e-mail and other tools to build networks or even as a medium of participation.

Many of the issues that would be addressed by the proposed policies are already priorities for U.S. citizens. For both men and women, issues like unsupervised children, crime, and a lack of child care are considered important problems facing U.S. communities (see Table 4). Women are especially likely to name these problems as serious issues.

By focusing on the factors that affect women's and men's participation in political and civic institutions, policymakers can improve the health of our nation's democracy for men and women—by involving more citizens directly and by making it more responsive to citizens' needs. This means recognizing new issues, including work-family policies and freedom from gender-based violence, as basic political needs.

This Research-in-Brief is based on a paper by IWPR's Amy Caiazza, Ph.D., and Heidi Hartmann, Ph.D., for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The paper was presented at the Wingspread conference (June 2001), hosted by The Johnston Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

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