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GENDER COMPOSITION IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT
ORGANIZATIONS: THE PREDOMINANCE OF WOMEN IN
EMERGENT CITIZEN GROUPS IN DISASTER*

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Introduction

This paper examines potential conditions associated with the gender composition of one type of social movement organization, an emergent citizen group (ECG) in disaster. Knowledge of the gender composition of social movements represents an important addition to class, religious, ethnic, and attitudinal foci. This paper will comment on the (preliminary) conclusions of the formal voluntary organization and social movement literature concerning the role of gender in these social phenomena. The predominance of women in ECG's may be interpreted as a consequence of task structure, previous existing networks, recruitment strategies, perceived discretionary time, and perceived conflict between involvement in ECG's and commitment to other roles.

The data used in this study are taken from a much broader study of ECG's in disasters. Nearly 40 ECG's from that study are considered in our analysis. The sites where these ECG's are located were selected (among other reasons) for their high risk and vulnerability to hazards; their geographical location encompassing areas on the east and west coasts, the southern, northern, and midwestern sections of the United States; and their urban or rural locations. Typical threats in these areas include earthquakes, mud- and landslides, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, toxic wastes, severe pollution, massive explosion, nuclear accident, and other situations. Most, if not all, areas in this study are exposed to more than one threat. To protect the promised confidentiality of our respondents, specific names of places, groups, and individuals have been withheld.

Over 400 interviews were conducted to gather data pertaining to this paper. Some of those interviewed had knowledge of more than one ECG situation. In addition to interviews, we analyzed many documents: newspaper articles, correspondence between ECG members and various organizations, intra-organizational memos, private notes and memos, newsletters, community data, and videotapes. Observations from the field sites were also utilized.

The Composition of Social Movement Organizations

A recent approach for studying collective behavior and social movements has been from an organizational or structural perspective, in contrast to other earlier (and some recent) approaches from a psychological or social-psychological perspective. The work of Zald and Ash (1966) was an early attempt to study collective behavior from an organizational approach. In this study, the concepts of social movement and social movement organization (SMO) are differentiated (Zald and Ash, 1966:329). From within this perspective, a social movement is defined as "a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society" (McCarthy and Zald, 1977:1217-1218). SMO's are defined as a "complex, or formal organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or countermovement and attempts to implement those goals" (McCarthy and Zald, 1977:1218). ECG's would seem to fall under the rubric of an SMO, as they have a definite organizational structure, including elected officers;

horizontal and vertical division of labor; and goal orientation. We find that, generally, ECG's do identify with a particular generic social movement, especially in the realm of technological hazards.

At this point in our research the data suggest that females equal and usually exceed males in participation in both membership and leadership of ECG's. This pattern holds, with few exceptions, across technological and natural disaster groups; membership characteristics of age, race, and class; geographic features of region: urban-suburban-rural; and such group characteristics as degree of formalization, professionalization, size, length of existence, and complexity of task structure. However, ECG's are heterogeneous phenomena; therefore, such sweeping generalizations are not immediately suggestive of particular interpretive schemes. Thus, the operation of different sets of variables may produce the "same" consequences of female participation rates within ECG's.

During the late 1960's, a number of studies were conducted to ascertain the process and compositions of contemporary social movements (e.g., see Lipset, 1971). In these studies, gender participation is virtually ignored; we can only assume that most social scientists believed that men were the only participants (or the only ones worth studying) during this time. Baird (1970:126-127), however, does note from a survey of over 12,000 students in the late 1960's that the percentage of men and women who considered themselves activists or moderately activist was essentially the same (about 12 percent). It is safe to assume, however, from the numerous accounts available, that most of the activists of 10 to 15 years ago in the civil rights and the anti-war movements were male. Only in the case of the rising feminist movement were a large number of women active and visible to the general public.

A textbook of social movements from the middle 1960's gives a reason why women were neglected in the analysis of social movements and why it was assumed that just men were involved:

That ascriptive categories are also class categories is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the case of sex, which makes clear that in the United States women have no controlling roles in the relations of production; the subtleties of the other ascriptive identities (religion, ethnicity, religion) are entirely lacking in the case of sexual identity--women are a class, in a much simpler and homogeneous way than are ethnic groups. Therefore, our case for treating all ascriptive categories as special cases of the relations of production is strengthened (Ash, 1966:16).

Clearly it is argued that women were generally powerless and they had no impact in SMO activity. Hence it is argued there were no reasons to study women in SMO's.

Throughout American history, women have played a significant role in various social movements. Women's participation in such activities has not remained static, but rather (like social movements as a whole),

increased or decreased due to a number of situational conditions. Even though a number of studies on group recruitment and membership exist, none really explains gender composition.

For a number of reasons, it is difficult to ascertain the impact of women as participants and leaders of social movements. The relevant literature is scattered throughout journals and texts devoted to political science, collective behavior, social movements, history, anthropology, and feminist studies. Authors differ as to the type of group incorporated in these studies of group composition (for example, should school, church, and occupation-related groups be considered formal volunteer organizations or social movement organizations?). Moreover, quantified data on rates of participation by gender are scarce. Isolated examples of the high rates of female participation in child labor and tenants' rights movements (e.g., see Mauss, 1975) do little to clarify the question addressed by this paper. The question of which types of SMO's women are likely to participate in remains quite open and probably subject to analysis from historical and social structural perspectives.

Parkum and Parkum's (1980) review of factors associated with rates of community participation noted that no consistent association has been established between participation by gender and quasi-formal and formal community activity. They conclude that the literature suggests that rates of participation by gender may be related to the topical focus of the activity. Boyte (1980:Chapter 6) has noted that women's participation may be increasing in a number of social movements, especially those involving issues of land use, environment, and health. He offers, however, no explanation for this trend.

We do not find the expressive-instrumental classification of groups (with women as the former, men the latter) as a revealing indicator. Both instrumental and expressive foci are present in all ECG's (although to varying degree), and these factors are not related to gender composition. We also find pragmatic and ideological stances taken by both male and female ECG members, hence the relative emphasis on pragmatic or ideological arguments by ECG's or ECG members does not appear to be a factor which distinguishes ECG's by gender composition of their membership.

Features of American Social Structure

As we have previously noted, other than the women's movement itself, most other social movements and social movement organizations over the last 15 years have largely consisted of men in terms of both leadership and membership roles. Obviously, the women's movement has had an impact upon our society over the last 10 years or so (although most members of the movement, we assume, would contend not enough change has occurred). Women have entered numerous activities previously engaged in primarily by men, including jobs, careers, sports, and local and national social movement activity. A combination of legislative, normative, and attitudinal changes has precipitated a wider acceptance of diverse roles which women may assume. Hence, the social structure is more conducive to women organizing in response to an issue.

Concomitant with the opportunities for greater female activity in social movements has undoubtedly been the more favorable and sympathetic reception to ECG's composed of females by government and business organizations. The level of acceptance, however, appears to be less than to the male groups in similar situations.

Among the structural characteristics of American society pertinent to this study is the supradomestic realm, the realm of agencies and social policy. The supradomestic realm comprises a set of institutions, organizations, and activities which relate the domestic-household sphere to the public-jural sphere. This realm is concerned with issues which originate from within the domestic sphere but which are controlled or regulated at a higher than domestic level. Gonzalez (1973) has defined the supradomestic domain as that dimension of social organization in which "domestic" matters are at least partially controlled by the state apparatus. Gonzalez argues that the public health, like the fight against pollution, is an extension of private, domestic, and family health concerns. She further suggests that the "domestic" issues of consumerism, health, and education have been usurped or impinged upon by jural institutions, with the result that the family, small groups, and individuals acting as private citizens have little control over this realm. Women who enter the so-called political world of the United States tend to be concerned (through their occupations and participation in political and social change movement organizations) with issues which can be seen as extensions of the formerly domestic or private domain (Gonzalez, 1973).

A central aspect of the goals and issue-definition of ECG's concerns quality of life, health, and the investment in home and community which the disaster agent threatens. These concerns are seemingly more readily expressed and acted on by females than males.

Friendship Networks and Recruitment

Aveni (1978) and Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson (1980), among others, have documented the role of friendship networks in the mobilization and recruitment patterns of collective behavior and social movements. A focus on friendship networks suggests that recruitment may be viewed as a function of such structural features as structural proximity, availability, and affective interaction with movement members (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson, 1980). These features are apparent in the mobilization and recruitment of ECG's and represent one set of variables which may account for the difference in gender composition of these groups.

Two general ECG recruitment patterns are described below. The first (and most prevalent pattern identified in our sample) involved the gradual identification of a problem and the need to take some action arising through extensive contacts between friends. This occurs over coffee, cards, car-pooling, and often day-to-day informal interaction. These friends, all women, often living in the same neighborhood if not on the same street, then form a group with themselves as the core (if not the sole members) to attempt to prevent, remove, or minimize a disaster agent. As a result, men are excluded at the onset and frequently are not later included to any significant extent.

The second pattern involves a widespread though localized recognition of the actual potential disaster agent. In these cases the people who are eventually mobilized are not those who frequently interact prior to the precipitous event. There may be pockets of small networks of acquaintances in this situation. Frequently, the disaster agent has been identified as such by the media, by the announcement of a permit application for potential pollution (air, water, soil), or by an actual disaster impact in the area (see Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson, 1980, on mediated and public channels of outreach and engagement possibilities for SMO information dissemination and recruitment). Acquaintances and friendships develop throughout the mobilization period, as evidenced by the number of non-disaster-related interactions these people have after mobilization. These patterns of interaction can be attributed to the initial meeting and group assignments to various tasks. One feature of these newly-formed friendships or relationships between the members is the formation of female dyads and triads which occur much more frequently than with males. These dyads then proceed to recruit non-member acquaintances (frequently female) into the ranks of the ECG's. Neighborhoods where this pattern occurs are frequently heterogeneous, especially with respect to socio-economic status. This pattern has occurred, however, in larger areas (e.g., residential suburbs and cities in which case blanket recruitment through the media is tempered by class and perhaps occupation-related channels of participation). These organizational meetings, although open to all interested, may be held at private clubs or homes. Also, prior to the formal meetings in this case, a number of individuals may formulate an agenda of organization; such action usually leads to these individuals (generally female) assuming leadership positions within the ECG.

With both patterns of recruitment, we generally do not find husband-wife participation; rather, one or the other participates. Participation would include: attending meetings, time and/or material resource donation, acceptance of task assignment, petition signing, and subscription to issue-oriented newsletters. These latter two activities may be considered husband-wife or household participation, although these activities are peripheral (as are the members) to the ECG's activity.

When wife-husband participation is related to mobilization, it is often in neighborhoods of nuclear families. Of our many cases, there were two situations in which wife-husband participation was notable: 1) two southern ECG's where small villages were impacted and community participation involved the mobilization of families and households (i.e., these communities still have a very strong notion of family and community), and 2) in some post-disaster situations in which families and households were inflicted with great material loss.

Recruitment and Constraints on Participation

Female core group members frequently point to the predominance of females, or the lack of active male participation, as a factor influencing the legitimacy of their group and as a symptom of their difficulties in recruiting "help". Members comment that their perceived legitimacy in the eyes of public officials, both elected and appointed, would probably increase if they had a male to represent the concerns of the ECG, even though the work of the group is accomplished without male labor. Some groups' members suggest that the group has or could have benefitted from the use of certain males' occupational-related contacts, savvy, and entree in their dealings with industry and to a lesser (but still important) extent, public officials and agency personnel.

These perceptions are not misplaced. Industry and public officials, and agency personnel frequently use such phrases as "a bunch of hysterical housewives," "concerned mothers," "neighborhood women," and the like to summarize their impressions of group characteristics. It is interesting to note that women ECG members label themselves as "housewives," "concerned mothers," and "neighborhood women," but not in a derogatory fashion. Female ECG members who are also professionals likewise use such labels, suggesting perhaps that women involved in ECG's are not numbered among those whose consciousness has been "raised" by the women's movement of the last decade. Certainly the sex ratio of group membership and the placement of males or females in leadership roles are salient features determining the perception of ECG's by outsiders (i.e., the media, elected and appointed public officials, potential recruits, and others) and their self-perceptions.

Both male and female members are quick to point out to constraints preventing the (more active) participation of males, although covert male support exists. The first constraint pertains to the tremendous input of time, energy, and personnel coordination inherent to information gathering (whether by phone, letter, or in person), much of which must take place during "business hours." The input (information gathering) and output (request for action, clarification, or confirmation of this information) are handled as a "package" rather than a division or allocation of labor necessary for the task. The fact that this "package" task requires that the member(s) operate during "business hours" biases the available labor in favor of females. This point should not be taken to indicate that employed women do not participate in ECG's; they do. Whether or not their occupation is, or is perceived as, less of a constraint (than males'--we do not care to speculate). These factors may be described as perceived discretionary time, a factor discussed by McCarthy and Zald (1973, 1977).

A common theme among ECG members is that most stated they were more active in the group since they had more spare time than their working husbands. We found their perception of spare time most interesting, since not only "homemakers" had this perception, but so did working women (including professionals) who were members of ECG's. Female ECG participants point to the disruption of the "normal household routine" and occasionally conflicts occur within marriages as a consequence of their activity.

We contend that one reason why women take such an active role in ECG's, even if family conflict increases from ECG activity, is that the women involved (from homemakers to professionals) consider themselves as "housewives" (we must reiterate, this is their own perceptions of themselves). Hence, we hypothesize that a great deal of their activity in the ECG is an extension of their role of "housewife." The domain of the woman who perceives her role as "housewife" is that of tending to the well-being of her children, her husband, and her home. When a disaster or potential disaster threatens, her activity in the ECG becomes an extension of her homemaking duties.

It is rather ironic that few of these women identify with the women's movement, which may relate to the rather conservative politics of female (and male) ECG members across all socio-economic status and most of the various geographical regions of the United States. When discussing the composition of the group with ECG members, we found they often disclaimed association with the women's movement, and feminist concerns and politics.

The second condition leading to differential gender participation is related to the form of decision-making procedures of ECG's. That is, many of the maintenance activities and much of the decision-making are carried out informally, rather than at formal meetings. Thus the ability of small numbers of members to meet and/or talk frequently (often three-four times a day over the phone, or over coffee) is an important prerequisite to active, constructive participation. Members point to failure of their recruitment attempt and subsume the lack of males under this. Underlying the general difficulty ECG's encounter recruiting members is a more specific difficulty perhaps characteristic of ECG's which form around a small nucleus of friends which makes them unable to clearly and unambiguously allocate authority and tasks, thus preventing recruiting by skills or making use of potential personnel resources. This structure of informal decision making is characteristic of both the first pattern of recruitment (described above) or the second, in which female dyads or triads take on, collectively, task assignments.

In conjunction with the lack of formal regularly scheduled meetings (which occur after initial organizational issue-related meetings for a month or two) and the absence of a newsletter, the recruiting dilemma hinders individuals from "coming up through the ranks," perhaps altering the sex-ratio of group composition. Without these factors these ECG's maintain a two-tier structure (core and periphery) rather than a three-tier structure. The former limits external acquisition of leadership and even general membership.

The third factor may be attributed to actual or perceived occupational sanctions. Males of the mobilized population are often employed by an organization which may be responsible for creating, monitoring, mitigating, or defining the disaster agent. Therefore, these males are constrained by the perceived possibility of job loss or other possible economic or social sanctions. For example, in a number of cases, "blue collar" families are concerned about toxic dump sites or water and air pollution. The husband's job and the local economy are linked directly to the technological agent. Hence, the worker-husband is not inclined to become involved for fear of

losing his job. In an example involving middle or upper-middle socioeconomic status, white-collar situations, we find the wives quite active in clean air or environment and other similar activities. Ironically, it is the companies employing their husbands or friends' husbands, that the women's ECG is working against.

Conflicts between the husband's job and the wife's participation are not limited to technological disaster situations. Small businessmen or politically active and upwardly mobile men are not inclined to participate where defining a disaster is concerned (such as a flood zoning or relocation situation) or the redevelopment of a business area after a tornado since if these individuals challenge the business norms of the community, they may not have business licenses renewed or may be deprived of political favors that they would normally obtain. The wives, however, as in the case of the technological disasters, continue the fight within their ECG's. In some of these cases, women have commented that they have had to "drop to the background" during some debates due to their husband's employment.

Conclusion

Gender composition is a topic that has been neglected in social movement research. In this study we attempt to explain why a predominance of women are involved in ECG's in disaster. It is interesting to note that in these cases, ECG's have dealt with aspects of the (male-dominated) political arena, and have encountered varying degrees of success.

A number of factors contribute to ECG's consisting of mostly women: changes in the American social structure regarding women's roles in society, friendship and network patterns between women for recruitment, and "perceived" discretionary time. Although heavily involved in political activity regarding disasters, women ECG members are not participants or members in the women's movement. Ironically, much of their activity in this type of social movement organization can be traced to women's perception that their main role is "housewife," that is protecting and tending to the affairs of home and family. A disaster (threat) can impact the home and family, hence, the interest and political activity. A broader analysis of a number of social movements and social movement organizations, along with more studies taking note of gender composition should aid researchers in explaining the relationship of social issues (e.g., the draft, women's rights, disasters), social structure, and gender composition of social movement organizations.

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