Introduction

The previous chapter presented a profile of the religious organizations that were targeted and the volunteer groups that were surveyed. It offered an outline of their volunteer domains, described the setting for their actions and suggested their interrelationship with external actors.

The present chapter focuses on the women targeted for the present study. Drawing upon questionnaire data, the following sections provide information on the respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics, perceptions and expectations in terms of religiosity, volunteer work and gender roles. The analysis attempts to explore the most important components informing women’s volunteer practices and the perceived effects of such activities in their daily lives.

For the purpose of this study, only selected factors that the literature has found significant in predicting volunteering at the community level have been measured—factors such as education, household composition, occupation, social network and religious socialization. Similarly, when analyzing the effects of volunteering, a few selected components of citizenship were examined through the questionnaire data, such as personal development, trust, self-efficacy, pro-social behaviour and social networks. All those components were examined in combination with the perceptions of gender in order to explore the potential effects on women’s social identity.

Socio-Demographic Data

Age Make-Up of Respondents

People’s reasons for volunteering change as they pass from one stage of life to another because they develop different interests and needs, change their social relations and acquire different resources.\(^1\)

For the purpose of this study a preference for women between twenty and forty years of age was adopted for the selection of respondents. The rationale

\(^1\) For a discussion of the relationship between life course stages and volunteering see Musick and Wilson 2008: 221–66.
behind this choice is the idea that the life course of most women in that age group is marked by important changes, such as entering into the labour market, setting up a home, forming a family and working to support it. The phase of life between young adulthood and middle age is, therefore, a crucial stage in an individual’s life course because working, getting married or having children can alter priorities, obligations, resources, and social networks, and generate different ones. In so doing, women in this age range tend to face issues of identity construction, with public narratives intersecting with government policies on family and work, within which women experience their own autobiographical narratives (Somers 1994). In this process, membership in religious organizations also supplies public narratives, as well as structured biographical narratives, such as that of the religious volunteer.

Although the preference criterion of age was a necessary condition for this research, middle age and older women were also recruited. Women aged between forty and sixty tend to have steadier and closer ties, and become agents of influence on children, kinship and friends. Therefore, middle-age women may alter and contribute to their own life stories as well as to those of other people, and may provide role models and become a source of narratives in which their children, spouses, kinship and friends can locate themselves, enriching their social and individual resources.

A number of older respondents were also included in the sample in order to explore their perspectives on social engagement and gender roles as compared with the younger generations. The later stage of the life course, when people generally retire, is usually a time favouring voluntary action. Older people tend to be relatively free of social obligations related to family and work, and they enjoy more free time. Thus, if they live in a community with opportunities to volunteer, they are likely to become engaged (Taniguchi 2008: 4).

The targeted sample shows an overall age balance, with the number of respondents in their twenties only slightly larger than the group in their forties and sixties. The tendency toward a majority of younger respondents is related to the criterion of selection applied in the present study, as discussed above.

In the “Basic survey on social life” conducted by the Statistics Bureau in 2007, the results on participants and participation rates in volunteer activities contributing to welfare services show that women aged between forty-five and seventy-five were the majority in the female sample (Sōmushō tōkeikyoku 2007). However, young women in their twenties and thirties dominate this study, thus showing no correspondence with the average age of female volunteer participants presented in the official data mentioned above.

There are few available surveys providing the age range of grassroots level volunteers in religious groups and unfortunately none of them gives the age