

“Meetings” in a Municipality as Measured by a Questionnaire Survey: With a Focus on Male Participation

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1. Introduction

Following the Great East Japan Earthquake, a diverse variety of “meetings”^{*1} were held in disaster areas, and a variety of styles of initiatives were also conducted in Municipality A, where we are located. However, participating residents and supporters have commented on these initiatives by saying things like “It would be great if more people could join in” and “It would be good with more male participants”; this is more or less the same in different areas. In addition, there were also those worrying that men would be isolated or risk physical and mental unhealth if they did not participate in such “meetings.” Furthermore, since we had the same worry, we conducted a questionnaire survey in Municipality A to grasp the current state of these “meetings,” and we report the results by adding a discussion from the perspective of “male participation.”

2. Survey methods and survey participant breakdown

We distributed a questionnaire consisting of 12 questions on four pages (including a demographic question sheet) by post. Completed questionnaires were collected by post (some participants delivered them in person). The participants were chief administrators in all administrative divisions of Municipality A (including temporary housing societies) as well as temporary support staff, making a total of 50 persons. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the respondents.

Table 1. Respondent breakdown (N = 24)

Job title	Chief administrator Temporary support staff No response	6 persons (25%) 17 persons (71%) 1 person (4%)
Age	30s 40s 50s 60s 70s 80s No response	2 persons (8%) 0 persons (0%) 3 persons (13%) 8 persons (33%) 7 persons (30%) 2 persons (8%) 2 persons (8%)
Years of experience	【Chief administrators】	
	Under 1 year	1 person (4%)
	1 year or over, under 3 years	4 persons (17%)
	3 years or over, under 5 years	5 persons (21%)
	5 years or over, under 10 years	1 person (4%)
	10 years or over, under 15 years	1 person (4%)
	15 years or over, under 20 years	0 persons (0%)
	20 years or over	1 person (4%)
	Unknown	4 persons (17%)
【Temporary support staff】		

	Under 1 year	0 persons (0%)
	1 year or over, under 3 years	1 person (4%)
	3 years or over	5 persons (21%)
	Unknown	1 person (4%)

3. Survey duration and response rate

We dispatched the questionnaires in March 2016 with a deadline at the end of May 2016. We had a response rate of 50%.

4. Ethical considerations

We explained the following in writing when distributing the questionnaires.

(1) Answering the questionnaire is voluntary. Declining to answer it has no disadvantageous consequences.

(2) The survey results will be made publicly available.

Furthermore, we specified that returning the questionnaire would be considered providing consent.

5. Questions and answers

First, we divided the answers collected in the study into five categories according to type of “meetings” during aggregation. The following is a breakdown of the categories.

Physical health: Activities aiming to improve physical health through exercises, etc.

Mental health : Activities aiming to improve mental health through creative activities and other forms of exchange

Local activities: Activities to improve local connections (building and maintaining community)

Events : Activities to enjoy concerts and events themselves

Other : Activities that do not belong to the above categories

(1) Question 1

We asked about “meetings” regularly held in the local area where the respondents live (that they are in charge of), ※² both providing multiple choices and allowing freeform answers. The multiple choices included representative “meetings” held in many areas and “meetings” that we were aware of. The results clearly showed that a diversity of “meetings” were regularly held.

※¹ This study defines “meetings” as all activities where several people gather for a period of time, regardless of objective.

※² Since we distributed questionnaires to both chief administrators and temporary support staff, we used the two expression “live” and “in charge of.”

(2) Question 2

We asked about “meetings” irregularly held in the local area where the respondents live (that they are in charge of), allowing freeform answers. Between Question 1 and Question 2, the number of “meetings” for physical health and “meetings” for mental health are reversed.

(3) Question 3

We asked about “meetings” independently held in the local area where the respondents live (that they are in charge of), allowing freeform answers. These were mainly activities performed by local people for the benefit of local people, such as cleaning.

Questions 1–3 are summarized in Figure 1.

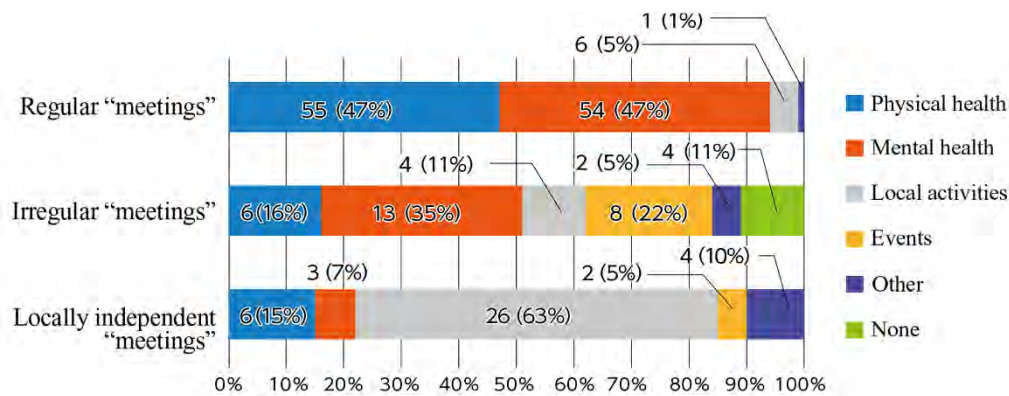


Figure 1. Regular, irregular, and locally independent "meetings"

(4) Question 4

We asked what percentage of locally resident men participated in the "meetings" identified in Questions 1–3. The result was **【80%–100%】** for local events, sports events, festivals, etc.; **【50%–70%】** for training trips; **【20%–40%】** for preventive care projects, karaoke, and tea-making sessions; and **【10% or less】** for lectures, cooking classes, etc.

The participation rate was high for cleaning events, festivals, local social gatherings, etc.

(5) Question 5

We asked the respondents about what reasons there might be for a high male participation rate for some events and what reasons there might be for a low rate in other cases.

【Reasons for a high participation rate】 Very interested in the contents; matching physical conditions (on a day off); personally invited; involves the whole district; an awareness or role that makes them feel indispensable

【Reasons for a low participation rate】 Not very interested in the contents; many women, making it difficult to join in; physical conditions (on a weekday); no habit of joining groups

The reasons 1) interest in the contents and 2) physical conditions (what day it is) appear important as they were common to both. Moreover, it seems that having a role also helps determine male participation.

(6) Question 6

We asked the respondents whether they would like men in their areas to participate more in the "meetings." The result was 16 "Yes" (70%) and 5 "No" (22%). This shows that they see male participation as an issue.

Furthermore, the reasons for answering "Yes" included health-related matters (lack of exercise, diseases related to physical inactivity, disuse syndrome, etc.) and preventing isolation (communication with neighbors). Meanwhile, the reasons for answering "No" had to do with everyone pursuing their own interests and enjoyment.

About 2/3 answered "Yes," which shows that many men are not participating. Moreover, there are worries that their non-participation can lead to physical or mental unhealthy.

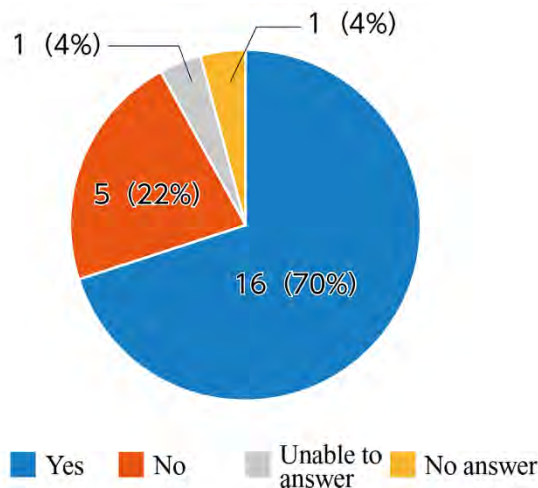


Figure 2. Do you want local men to participate more in “meetings”?

(7) Question 7

We asked about the positive aspects of male participation. The following are the answers we received.

- Men can fulfill certain functions (physical work, etc.) that make the meetings happen.
- Meetings become livelier if both men and women participate. Perhaps both men and women become more active when interacting with the other sex.
- We can talk about the sea while having a drink
- You get some peace of mind by seeing each other regularly (local crime prevention, checking each other's well-being, working together in case of a disaster, etc.)
- They can live more active lives by spending time with different people and getting to know new people besides family and work colleagues

It seems that male participation can lead to livelier meetings as well as more activity on the local and individual levels.

(8) Question 8

We asked if they plan and hold men-only events in the areas they live (if yes, what the content is). The result was 16 “No” (70%) and 4 “Yes” (17%). The content was cooking classes, mah-jongg, tea-making sessions, karaoke, business activities, and New Year's lion dances.

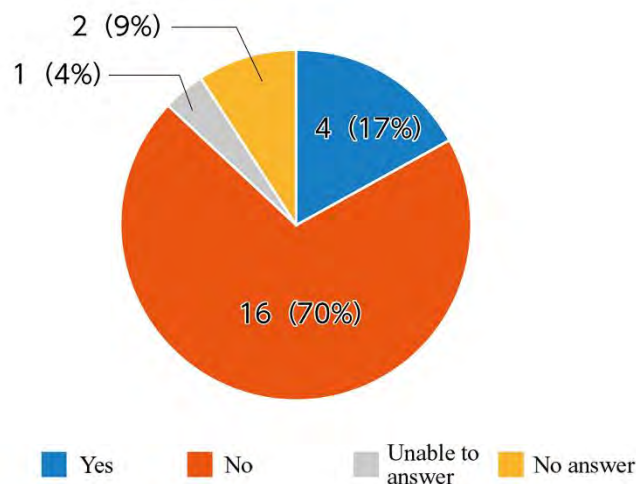


Figure 3. Do you hold men-only “meetings”?

(9) Question 9

We asked those who answered “Yes” to Question 8 what events were popular, to which they responded cooking classes, mah-jongg, and tea-making sessions.

Two answered cooking classes and both said they were popular. This might be because family structures have changed due to the disaster and men now have to cook for themselves.

(10) Question 10

We asked the respondents whether they thought it necessary to create new “meetings” where male participation is easier and, if yes, what kind of contents they should have. The result was 8 “Yes” (35%) and 7 “No” (31%), or about half-half. We also asked them to give their reasons for either answer.

【Good contents according to those who answered yes】

- Opportunities to talk (about local topics, society as a whole, etc.)
- Get-togethers with topics to discuss
- Cooking classes
- Don’t know, but considering it

【Reasons for answering no】

- They are active in everything and there are already many events
- It’s been five years, so it might be difficult to join in at this point

More or less the same number of respondents answered “Yes” and “No.” While some believe it is necessary, there are also those who think it would be difficult for them to participate in a new setting after five years. This suggests that it is important to consider whether a “meeting” is easily accessible to men before starting it.

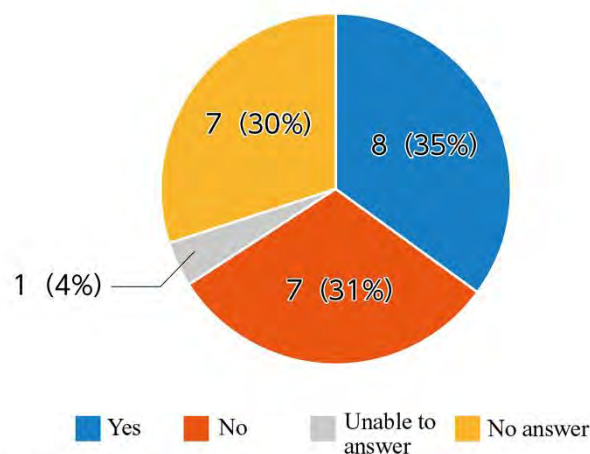


Figure 4. Is it necessary to hold “meetings” where male participation is easier?

(11) Question 11

We asked whether there are those who do not participate in local “meetings” but who are doing well in all other ways. The result was 16 “Yes” (73%) and 2 “No” (9%). The following answers show what concrete activities supported their wellbeing.

- Radio calisthenics by themselves
- Walking, strolling (individually or in a group of friends)
- Working in the fields

“Walking” was the most common answer by far. A likely reason for this is that it requires no special equipment and can be started without trouble.

(12) Question 12

As the converse to Question 11, we also asked what whether they worried about persons who neither participated in “meetings” nor seemed to live particularly active lives as well as about what they worried. The result was 14 “Yes” (68%) and 4 “No” (20%). The following were the worries of those who answered “Yes”.

- No interactions with neighbors
- Problems with alcohol (almost always drinking at home)
- Old age (issues of dementia, etc.)
- Already in bad mental or physical health
- Isolation leads to bad health in the form of physical unhealth, weak legs, and lack of mental energy
- Isolation makes it difficult to know their state and that is worrying

Most answers were worries about the fact that they were isolating themselves and the consequences of that.

6. Discussion

The questionnaire results show that while a variety of “meetings” are organized in the various areas, male participation is quite limited. Moreover, there appears to be a need to create “meetings” that are either more attractive or accessible to men, considering that the number of respondents wanting more male participation was more than three times higher than that of respondents not thinking so. Additionally, this is a problem that is not unique to Municipality A but is common to many municipalities. Moreover, they are paying attention to male participation and are implementing initiatives to ensure the wellbeing of local men.¹⁻³⁾ Based on such initiatives and our questionnaire results, it might be that male participation in “meetings” not only benefits men’s health, but might also be meaningful for community vitalization.

Ogawa⁴⁾ divides diseases related to physical inactivity into “the three types of I. those that affect the whole body, II. those that occur in one part of the body, and III. those that occur in the mind or nerves.” Based on this, “it is easy to just think of (2) one part of the body, but in reality, I. easily getting tired because of reduced heart and lung function or III. depressive tendencies and reduced cognitive function (looks similar to dementia) are important as well.” In fact, we received questionnaire responses worrying that they might incur physical and mental unhealth by not participating in the “meetings.” In addition, Ogawa writes that, “Diseases related to physical inactivity are 1. ‘restricted social participation’ that causes 2. ‘reduced lifestyle movement’ and 3. ‘leads to reduced physical and mental functions,’” which agrees with the contents of the questionnaire. This suggests that creating opportunities for men to go outside is important both for their physical and mental health and to help them live every day with energy. However, as shown by the results of our questionnaire, the reality is that men often tend not to participate, which is why we must not forget to ask the question, “What kind of contents will make it easier for men to participate?” Yet, since the questionnaire received quite a number of responses along the lines of “There are those who maintain their physical and mental health without participating in ‘meetings,’” we also should add that we also cannot forget the perspective that participating in “meetings” is not the only way to contribute to physical and mental health.

Characteristic of the initiatives discussed above¹⁻³⁾ is that opportunities are created for men to meet. The questionnaire results and the idea that “It is difficult to join in when there’s a lot of women,” which also facilitated the creation of the above initiatives,¹⁻³⁾ provide useful hints about how to create “meetings” that are accessible to men and that men might want to attend. The questionnaire results here did not go as far as a detailed, concrete examination of what kind of “meeting” would be attractive to men, but this is something we would like to explore if given the chance.

Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks to everyone who helped us with this questionnaire as well as everyone at Municipality A.

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