

# Role of Identity in Social Activism

Team Butterfly

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, social justice movements have always been at odds with conservative movements that are visibly cishet male-dominated. It then makes intuitive sense that social justice movements would be dominated (in terms of raw numbers) by women and other GSM (gender and sexual minorities). This would then imply that the leaders in these movements would also predominantly be women and/or queer. However, we have not observed this to be the case. Specifically focusing on green movements, we see that there is an over-representation of cishet white males in the leadership of these movements. One example is in the animal rights/vegan movement, where numerous cishet males such as Ed Winters, Joey Armstrong, Paul Bashir, Ryuji Chua etc have attained much greater mainstream recognition in the form of accolades and high-profile media attention in a movement that is statistically only 20% male. Another example would be Al Gore receiving praise for his presentation on global warming, while Greta Thurnberg is criticized as being 'bratty' and/or being ignored for her climate activism efforts. This dichotomy was an interesting observation, especially in green movements that are stereotyped as 'feminine' movements due to the values of care, conservation and empathy that they espouse, running counter to traditional masculine values such as aggression, conquest and taking up more space in general.

Taking inspiration from the dichotomy in the green movement, we wished to investigate the underrepresentation of individuals based on their identities and understand if there exists any correlation. One hypothesis we had was that women or queer individuals refrained from more confrontational methods of participation (which were also the most visible methods) due to safety concerns directly related to their gender identities. Another hypothesis that we had was that women were socialized since childhood to not be confrontational or take up space, while men were. Hence, even when both men and women were equally passionate about the same issue, men were more likely to engage in confrontation compared to women. We approach getting answers to these hypotheses through a mixed-methods approach, a combination of interviews and surveys, in order to understand how gender plays a role in participation in social activism in general, specifically in the sphere of more direct participatory activism.

The key question we wanted to investigate was if identity has a role to play in social activism. Researchers have studied this question from a social movement specific perspective but our aim was to get a holistic understanding and understand if these motivations exist for students participating in institute level social activism. Another question we wished to answer was how inclusive the activist spaces are and if members felt discriminated against within the activist space. Finally, we reflect on the

leadership perception of social activism. We try to understand who our participants believe are the prominent actors within their own activist space, and if gender plays a role in individuals knowing only the male actors within the space. Our study will likely help researchers and activists become more cognizant of the overrepresentation of male even in the activist spaces which are believed to be inclusive and non-discriminatory. In the following sections, we describe the related work, methods, findings, and then discuss the implications of our findings.

## 2. Related Work

Social movement researchers have studied the role of identity in acting both as a stimulus in individual participation in social movements. Rollins and Hirsch [15], and Swank and Fahs [17] studied how an individual's sexual orientation has a role to play in their participation in the LGBTQ+ rights movements. Activist identity has also been found to have an influence on micromobilization [12] and organizational forms and tactical choices [10]. Upon discovering the relationship between identity and activism, researchers questioned what activist identity really meant [8]. They found on one hand, there is a collective identity of the activists which binds the activists together and work towards the collective cause [14, 22, 23]. On the other hand, there exists a role-based activist identity through which activists internalize the role they play in the social movement [8].

Feminist scholarship, in specific, has studied the role of gender in the emergence, nature, and the outcome of social movements. Through the analysis of a postpartum support group movement [21], Taylor [20] investigates the link between social movement and gender. Upon studying individual-level data in form of surveys and interviews, and organizational-level data collected over a period of nearly 10 years, Taylor [20] argues that fuller integration of the gender scholarship with the social movement is important to understand the process of gender resistance, and social change.

Similar to their previous work on the relationship between sexual orientation and an individual's participation in social movement, Swank and Fahs [18] carried out a quantitative analysis to examine the factors influencing the participation of women in women's movements and political mobilizations. Survey of 1,876 participants (American National Election Survey), revealed that while women rarely join women's movements, activism is guided by a combination of resources (financial and educational), consciousness, and mobilization factors. The fields of water management treatment have historically been dominated by men. Women have often only been considered while discussing difficulty to access safe water. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* talks about how the deepening water scarcity and the failure of these ill-designed water supply systems have encouraged many women to join movements like India's Chipko protests. From this reading, we were inspired to look into personal reasons for environmental activism [24].

Along with studying the role of gender in isolation, researchers have also studied the intersectional role of gender, race, and class in social activism. Among the earliest and most pioneering works in this field, Barnett [1], explores the role played by Black women activists in the civil rights movement. The study found that even though several Black women like Septima Poinsette Clark, McCree Harris, Shirley

Sherrod, Diane Nash, Johnnie Carr, Thelma Glass, Georgia Gilmore, and JoAnn Robinson performed key leadership roles during the civil rights movement, their efforts had been largely unrecognized even after thirty years. Barnett largely attributes this “invisibility” to the interlocking oppressive structures of gender, race, and class. While the social movement literature largely focussed on the role of men as movement leaders [11, 13, 16], the feminist scholarship, on the other hand, focussed on the activism of White women [2–5], rendering the role of Black women invisible. In this work, data was analyzed of the leadership roles performed by Black men and women during the civil rights movement from 1955 to 1968. Then, based on this data analysis, a list of activists was developed to interview and a modified snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants. 34 formal interviews and 10 informal interviews were conducted in 1987. Through this work, it was discovered that despite performing significant leadership roles, caste, class and gender constraints prohibited the recognition of the leadership role of Black women in the civil rights movement by academia, the general public and most Black Americans.

An intersectional lens was also adopted to observe how in South Africa, bridging the oppressive structures of class and race, Black women collected together to undermine Apartheid from the onset [7]. Healy-Clancy [7] studies how the officials underestimated the collective power of women, and how personal and familial concerns of women helped them organize across racial and ethnic lines and be subversive of laws limiting their mobility. This work highlights the contribution of Black women in undermining apartheid in South Africa which had largely been under-appreciated in literature.

Finally, in recent years, with the rise of social media, we have observed social movements and national revolutions [9] emerge as a result of collective participation on social media platforms. The online movements which are often started in the form of some “hashtags” have been found to be largely supported by the historically marginalized communities. Grace et al. [6], identified young black women as the social media “powerhouses” who regularly define cultural, social, and political online trends. This is illustrated by the recent viral movements like the #MeToo movement and the #BlackLivesMatter movement which were both started by Black Women. Several other social justice campaigns like #SayHerName, #BlackGirlMagic, #TakeAKnee, and #BringBackOurGirls, are examples of Black women led online campaigns. Research has also been conducted to study the increase in social media activism shapes the educational experiences of Black college-age women [19].

To understand the many dimensions of how identity affects activism, researchers have looked into protesting inclinations for sexual minorities based on identity. A lot of our methods were influenced by this paper. The researchers sent surveys to select groups with questions about discrimination, self-perception and experience [25]. In our work, we aim to build on the previous research of invisibility of an individual’s contribution in social activism on similar axes of experience and participation. We investigate if the increased agency in online activism has led to a change in the perception and recognition of the role of women in social activism.

We now describe the methodology we adopted to carry out our study followed by our findings.

### 3. Methods

As described in section 1, we adopted a mixed-method approach involving a survey and interviews. Before drafting the survey questions, we did a critical literature review as highlighted in section 2 to understand the methods and findings existing in the feminist scholarship. Keeping with the theme of the invisible woman, we decided to form out survey questions to get a sense of participation vs visibility. While designing the survey, we chose to obtain objective responses instead of free text responses to enhance user participation and get quantitative results. This helped us draft questions which provided us with crucial insights on the perception of the role of gender in social activism.

For the interviews, we conducted three semi-structured interviews to get a deeper understanding of participant experiences while participating in rallies, demonstrations etc., and if their experience as an activist depends on their identity. Our interview participants were recruited through word-of-mouth. We contacted friends of team members to interview them and used snowball sampling to find more participants. As this might give us unequal representation of activist groups, we decided to constrain our interviewees to mainly environmental activism.

In the next section, we present our findings from the responses to our survey which received 28 responses and from our three interviews.

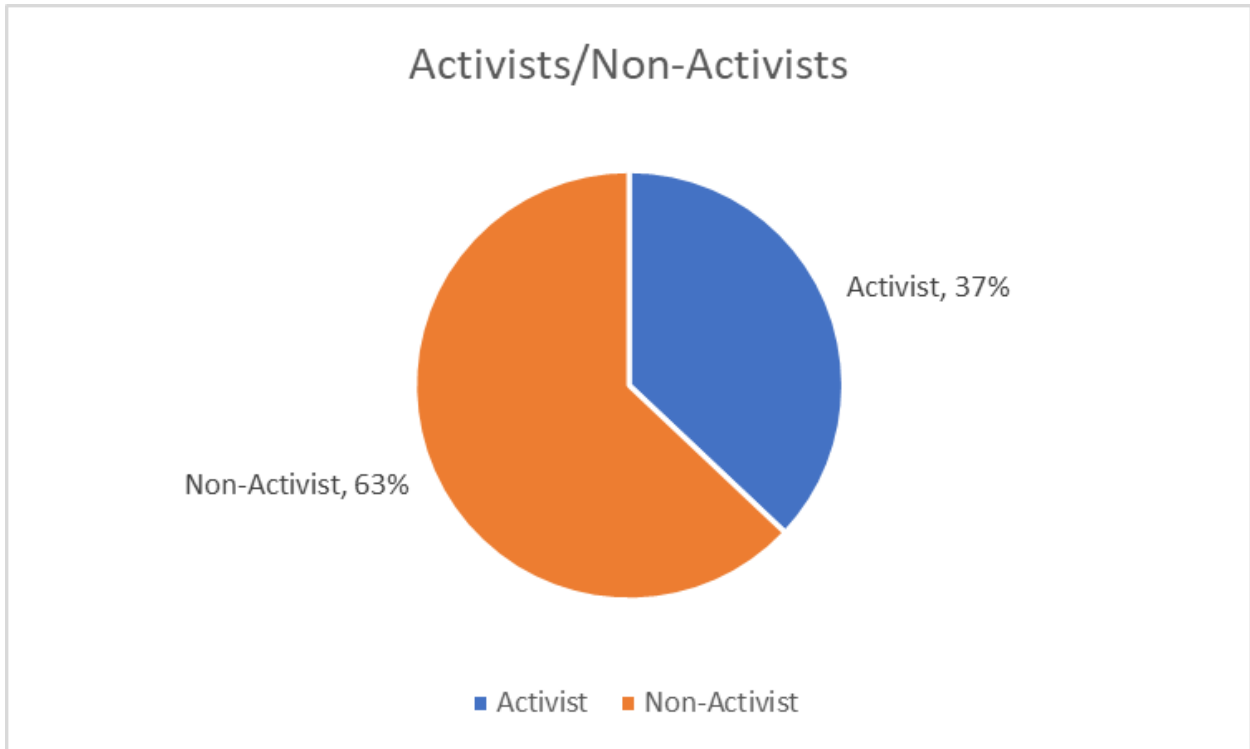
### 4. Findings

#### 4.1 Survey Findings

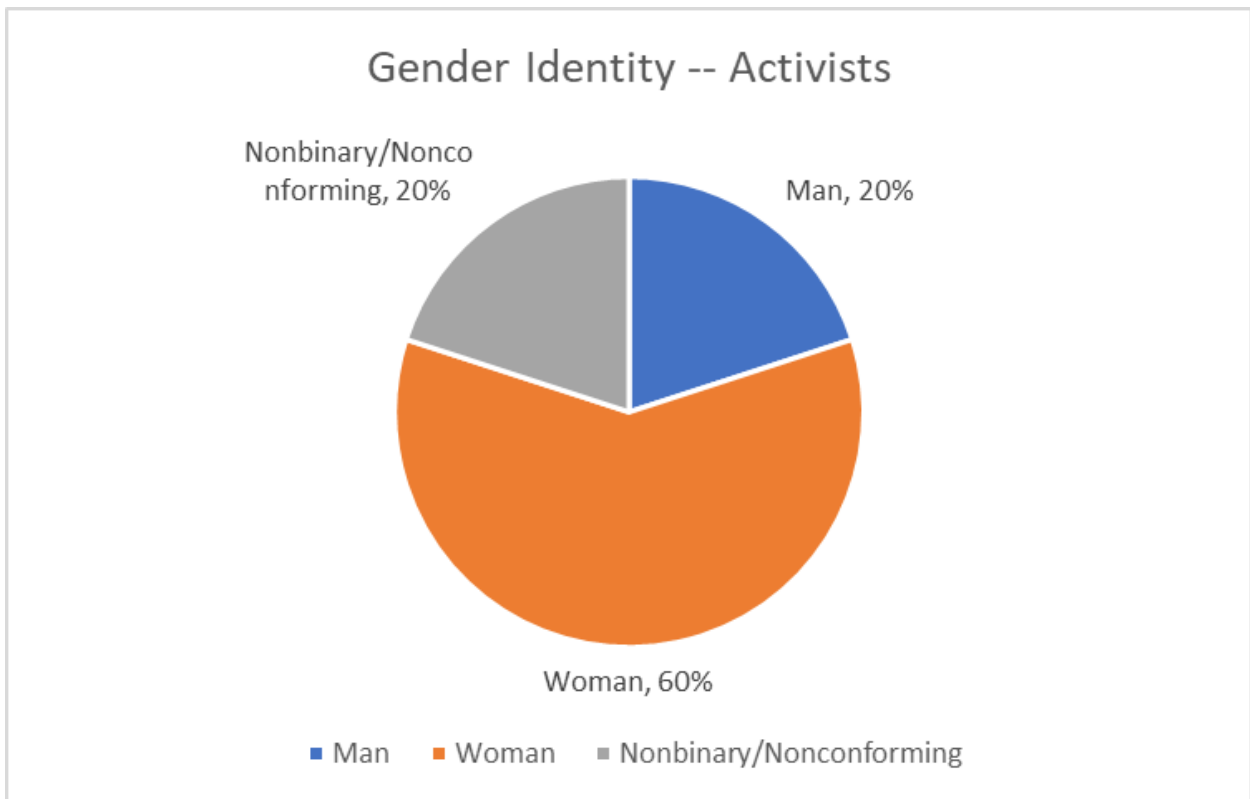
Survey results are presented below. Results are disaggregated by gender or activist status if the respondents of a particular category/status represented more than 10 percent (usually  $n > 2$ ) of the total respondent pool for that question. Q1 asked respondents to self-identify as one of three gender categories: man; woman; or nonbinary/non-conforming. 52 percent ( $n = 14$ ) of the respondents selected woman, 41 percent ( $n = 11$ ) of survey respondents selected man, and the remaining 7 percent ( $n = 2$ ) selected nonbinary/nonconforming.

Q2 then asked if respondents participated in activism. 63 percent ( $n = 17$ ) of respondents do not participate in activism and the remaining 37 percent ( $n = 10$ ) are activists. Of the 10 activists amongst the survey respondents, 60 percent ( $n = 6$ ) are women. Men and nonbinary/nonconforming individuals each constitute 20 percent ( $n = 2$ ;  $n = 2$ ). Of the 17 non-activists, 53 percent are men ( $n = 9$ ), and the remaining 47 percent ( $n = 8$ ) are women.

Q2. Are you involved in any form of social activism?



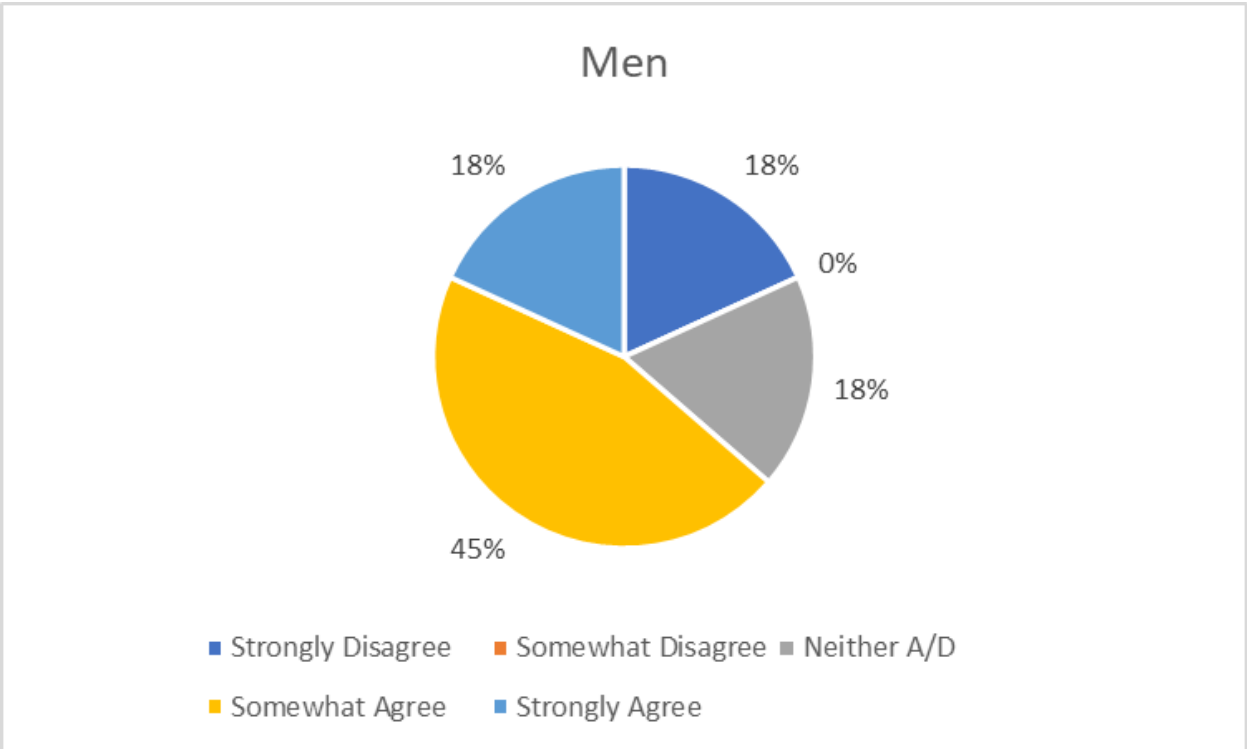
Q2. Are you involved in any form of social activism? (Activist Gender)



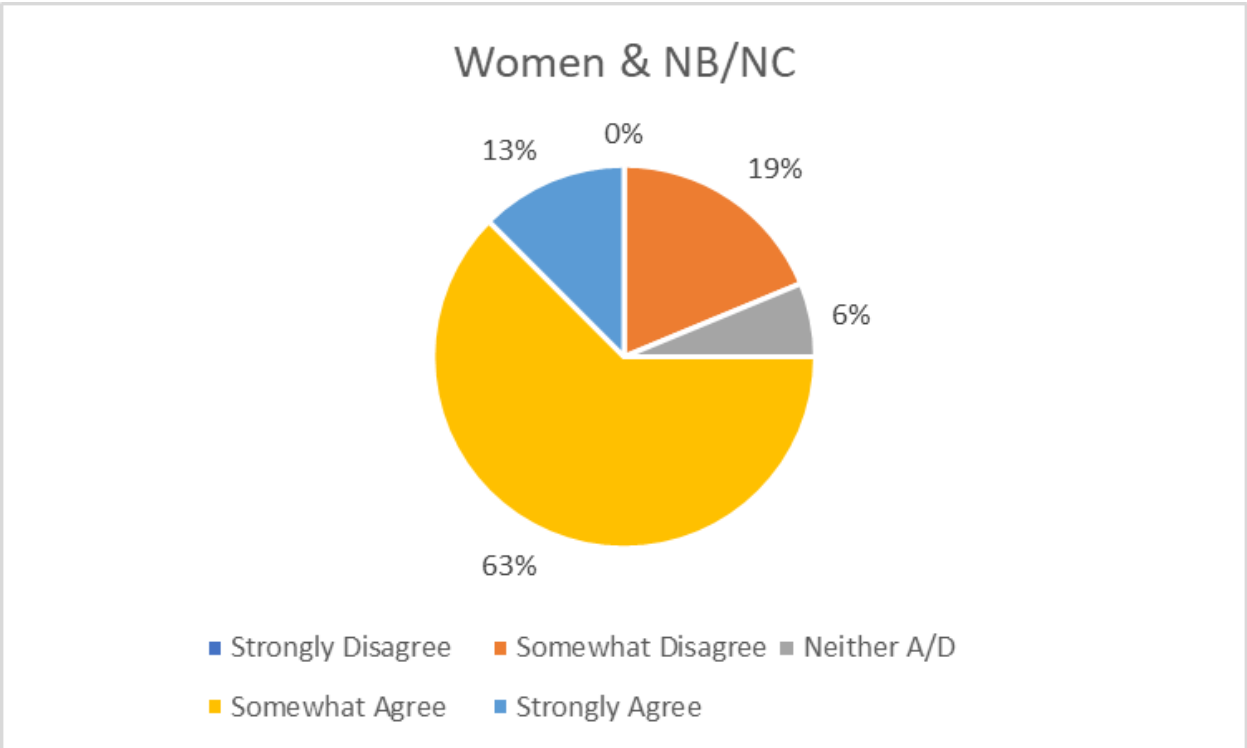
Q3 then asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement/disagreement with a series of statements about activism and the perception of male activists versus activists of other genders. Many of the statements for Q3 were only shown to respondents who answered that they are activists; however, only between 1-2 male respondents answered these questions and thus those results are not disaggregated by gender nor activist status. Additionally, given the low number of NB/NC participants and the framing of the survey questions, these participants' answers have been aggregated with the results for female participants for the remainder of analysis.

To the first statement, "*my personal identities impact my decision to participate in activism,*" 63 percent ( $n = 2$ ;  $n = 5$ ) of male respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed compared to 76 percent ( $n = 2$ ;  $n = 10$ ) of women and nonbinary/nonconforming people. 18 percent ( $n = 2$ ) of male participants strongly disagreed with this statement and the remaining 18 percent ( $n = 2$ ) neither agreed nor disagreed. 19 percent ( $n = 3$ ) of participants of other genders somewhat disagreed and the remaining 6 percent ( $n = 1$ ) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q3A. My personal identities impact my decision to participate in activism. (Men)

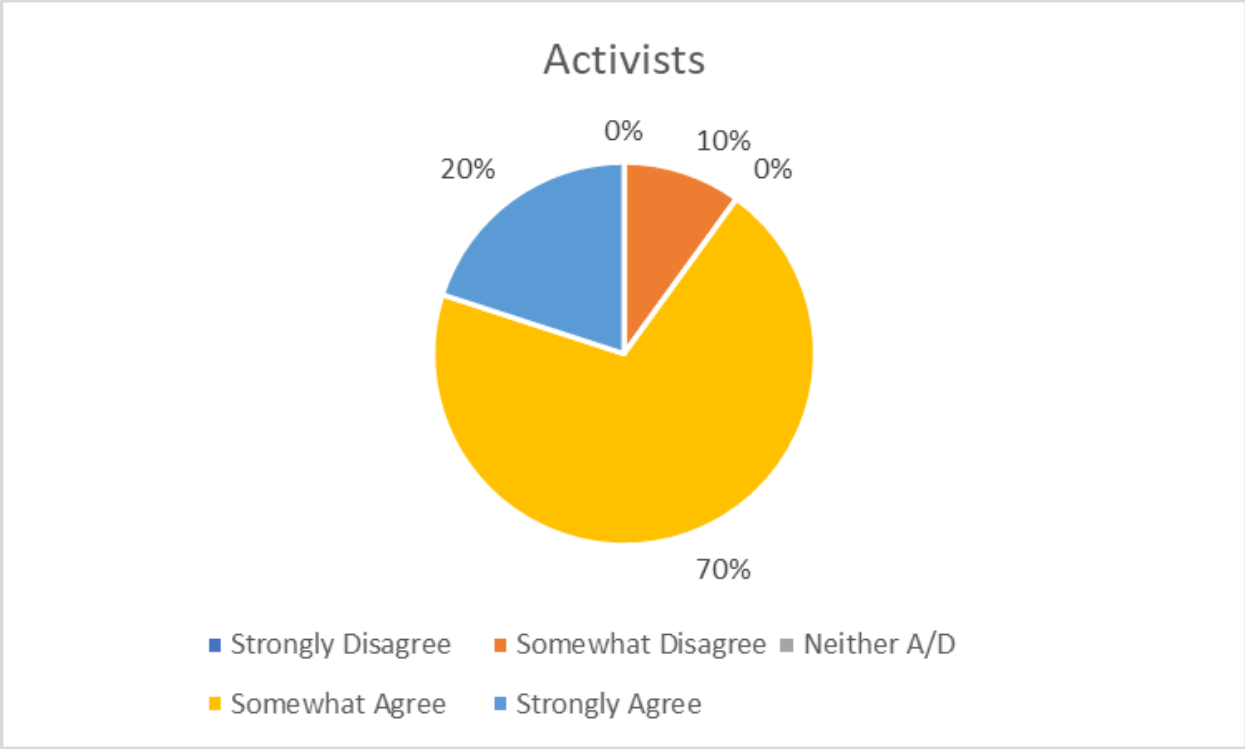


Q3A. My personal identities impact my decision to participate in activism. (Women & Nonbinary/Nonconforming)



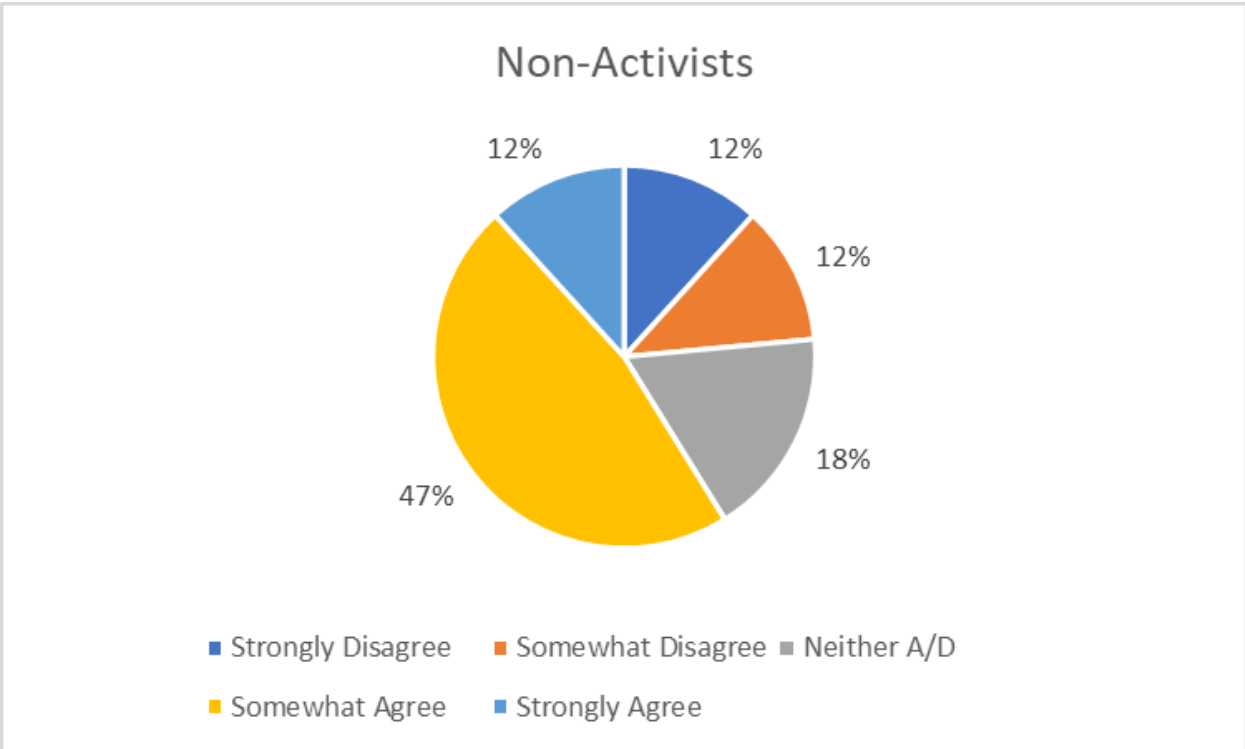
An overwhelming 90 percent ( $n = 2$ ;  $n = 7$ ) of activists in the survey either strongly or somewhat agreed with this first statement and the remaining 10 percent ( $n = 1$ ) somewhat disagreed. Still, a majority of non-activists (59 percent,  $n = 2$ ;  $n = 8$ ) either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, with an additional 18 percent ( $n = 3$ ) neither agreeing nor disagreeing and the remaining 24 percent ( $n = 2$ ;  $n = 2$ ) either strongly or somewhat disagreeing.

Q3A. *My personal identities impact my decision to participate in activism. (Activists)*



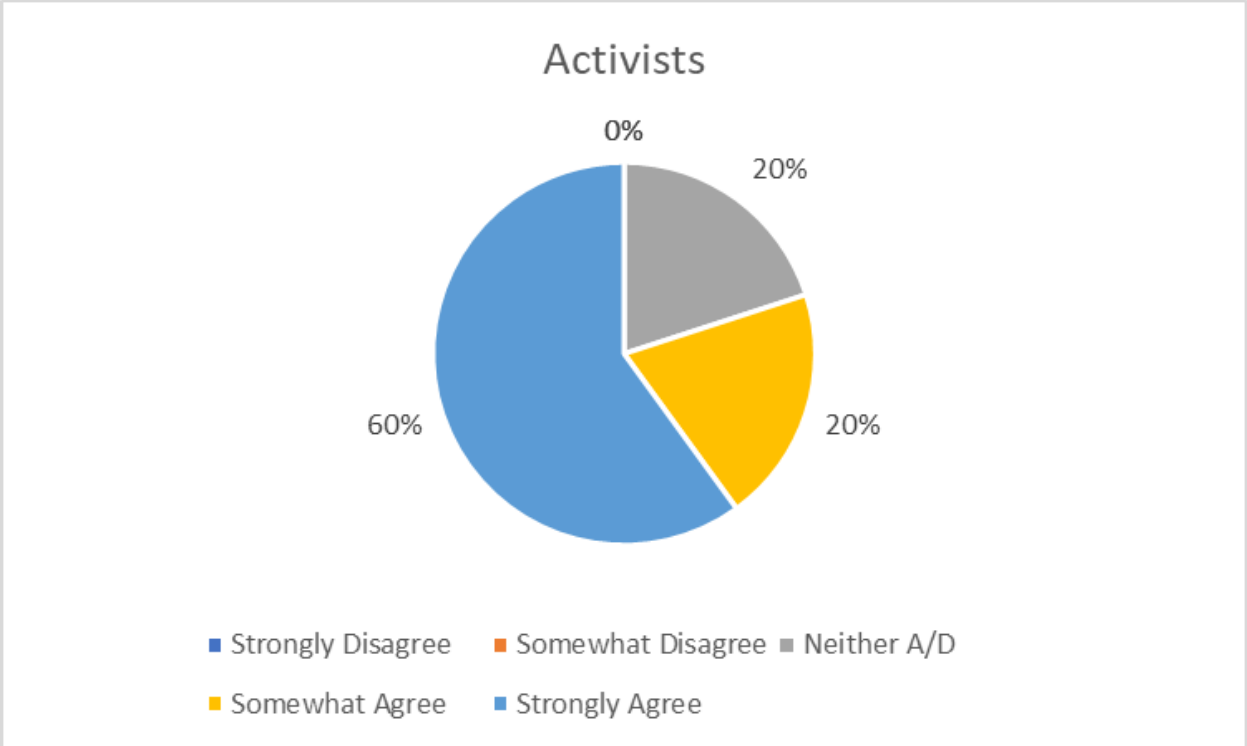


Q3A. My personal identities impact my decision to participate in activism. (Non-Activists)



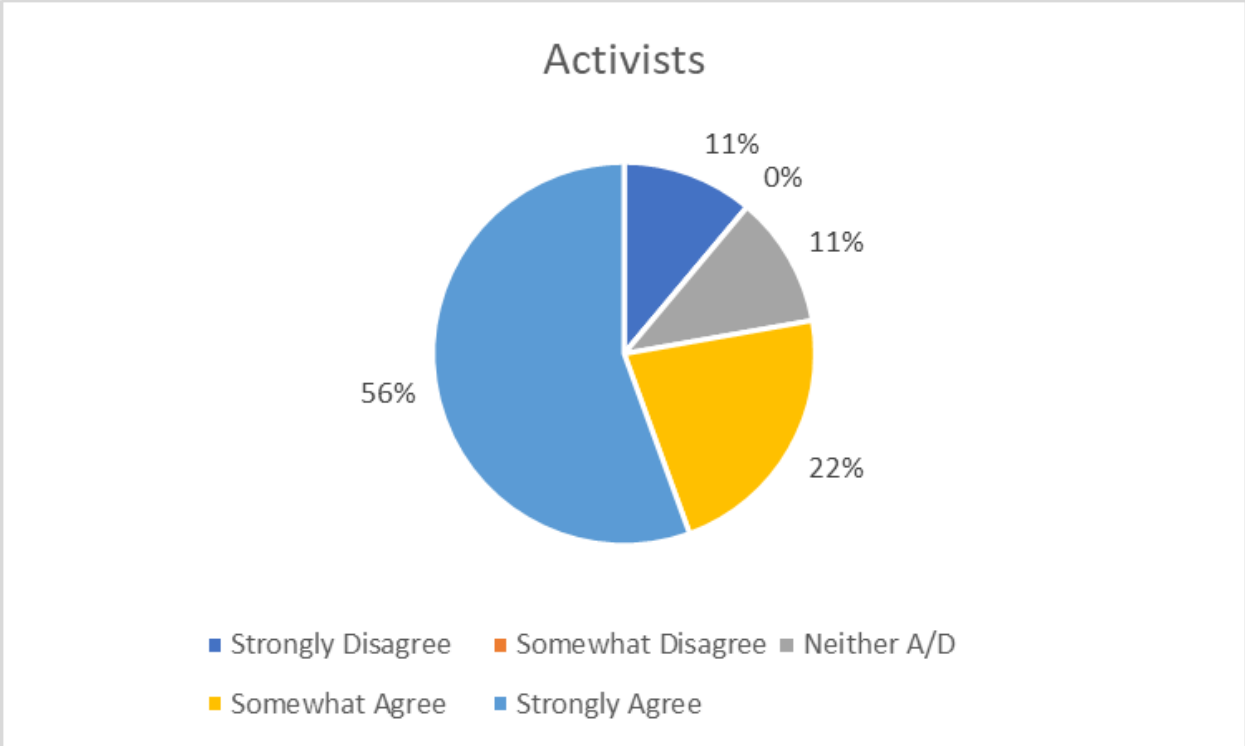
The second statement, “my personal identities impact the way I participate in activism,” was only posed to respondents who are activists. 60 percent (n = 6) of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, compared to 20 percent (n = 2) who somewhat agreed and 20 percent (n = 2) who neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q3B. My personal identities impact the way I participate in activism.



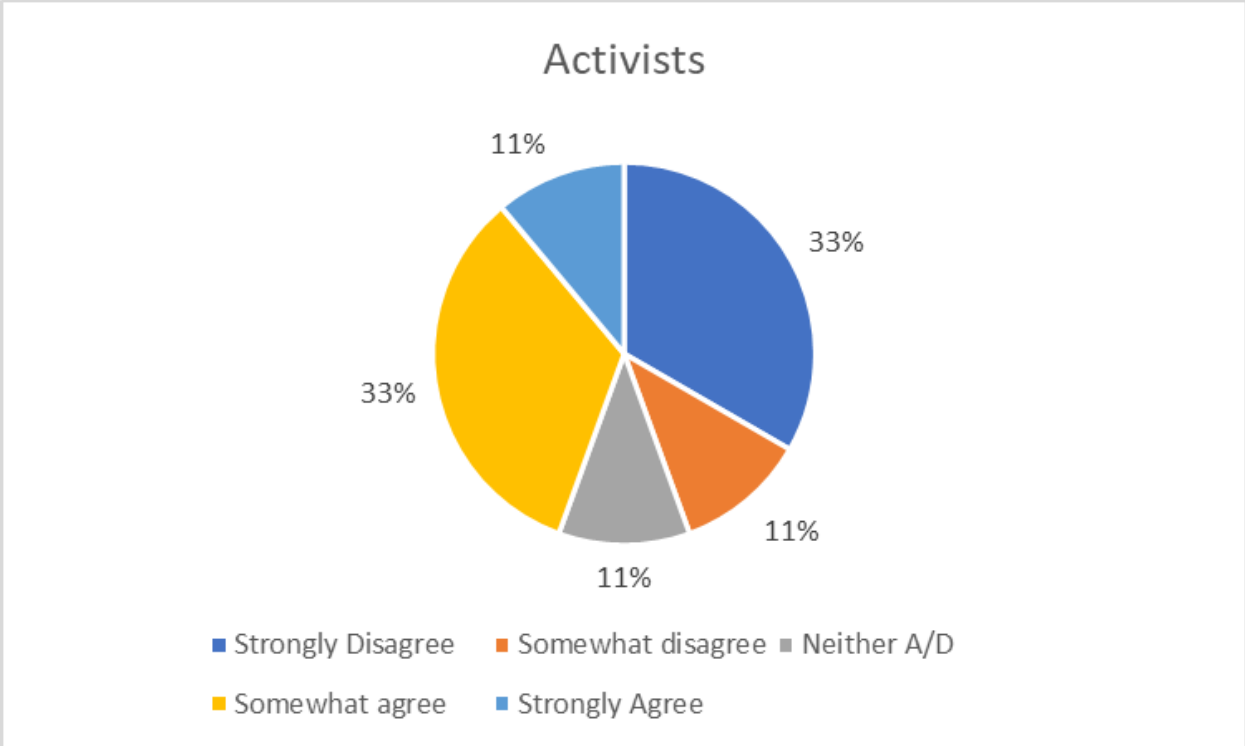
The third statement, “my organization is inclusive and affirming to members of all genders,” was only posed to respondents who are activists. 56 percent ( $n = 6$ ) of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, compared to 22 percent ( $n = 2$ ) who somewhat agreed, 11 percent who strongly disagreed ( $n = 1$ ) and 11 percent ( $n = 1$ ) who neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q3C. My organization is inclusive and affirming to members of all genders.



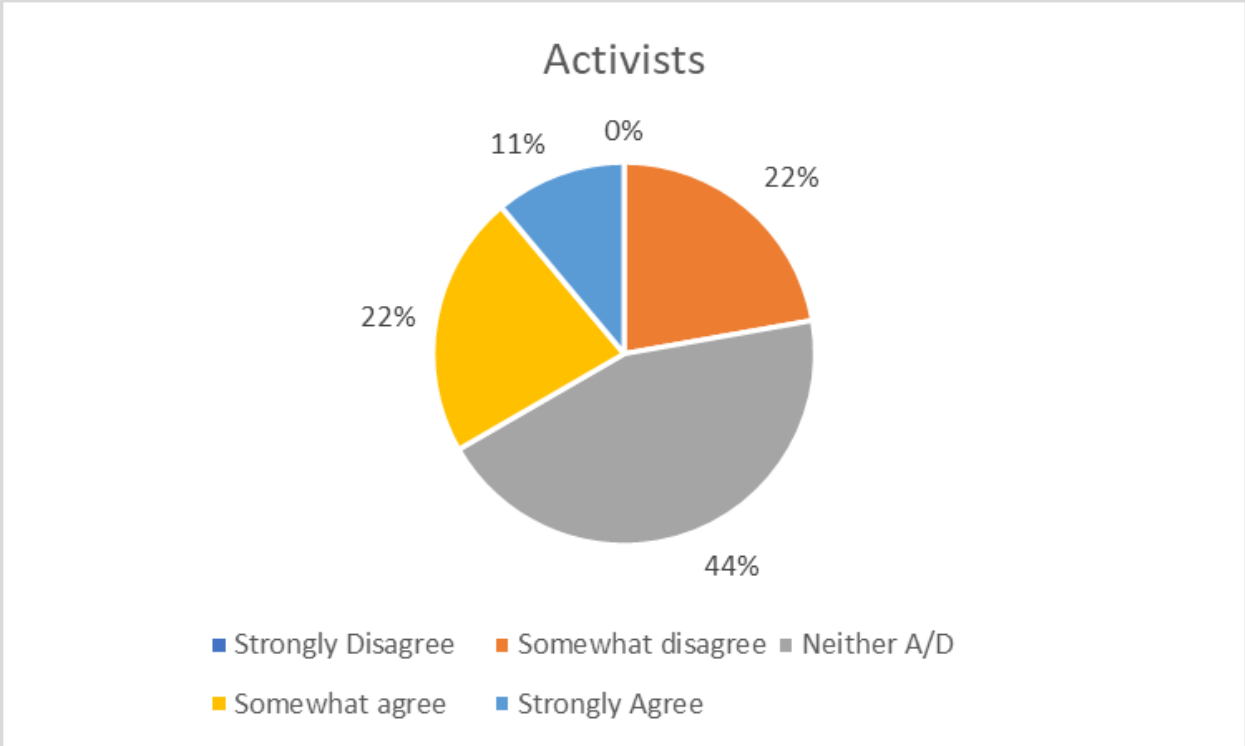
The fourth statement, “I have felt discrimination based on my gender within my activist space,” was only posed to respondents who are activists. 44 percent ( $n = 3$ ;  $n = 1$ ) of respondents either strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement and another 44 percent ( $n = 1$ ;  $n = 3$ ) either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement. The remaining 11 percent ( $n = 1$ ) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q3D. I have felt discrimination based on my gender within my activist space.



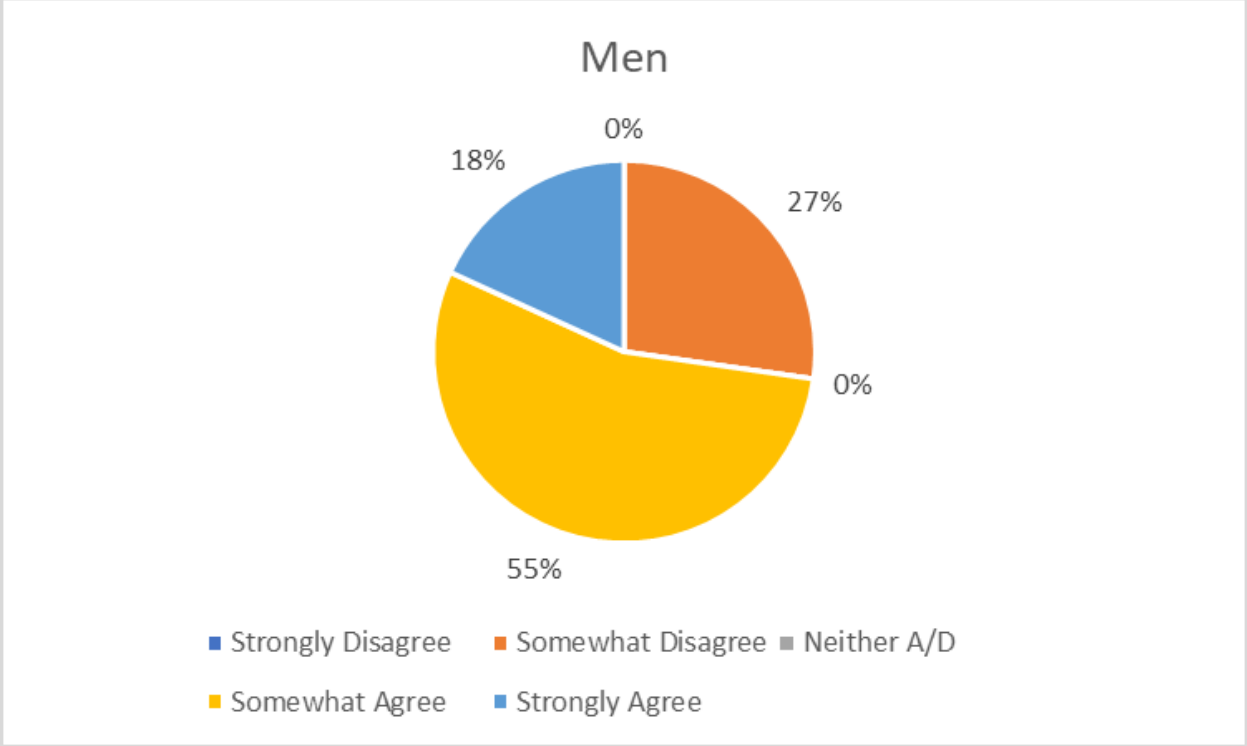
The fifth statement, “male activists are taken more seriously than activists of other genders within my activist space,” was only posed to respondents who are activists. A plurality of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed (44 percent,  $n = 4$ ), compared to 33 percent ( $n = 1$ ;  $n = 2$ ) who either strongly or somewhat agreed and 22 percent ( $n = 2$ ) who somewhat disagreed.

Q3E. Male activists are taken more seriously than activists of other genders within my activist space.

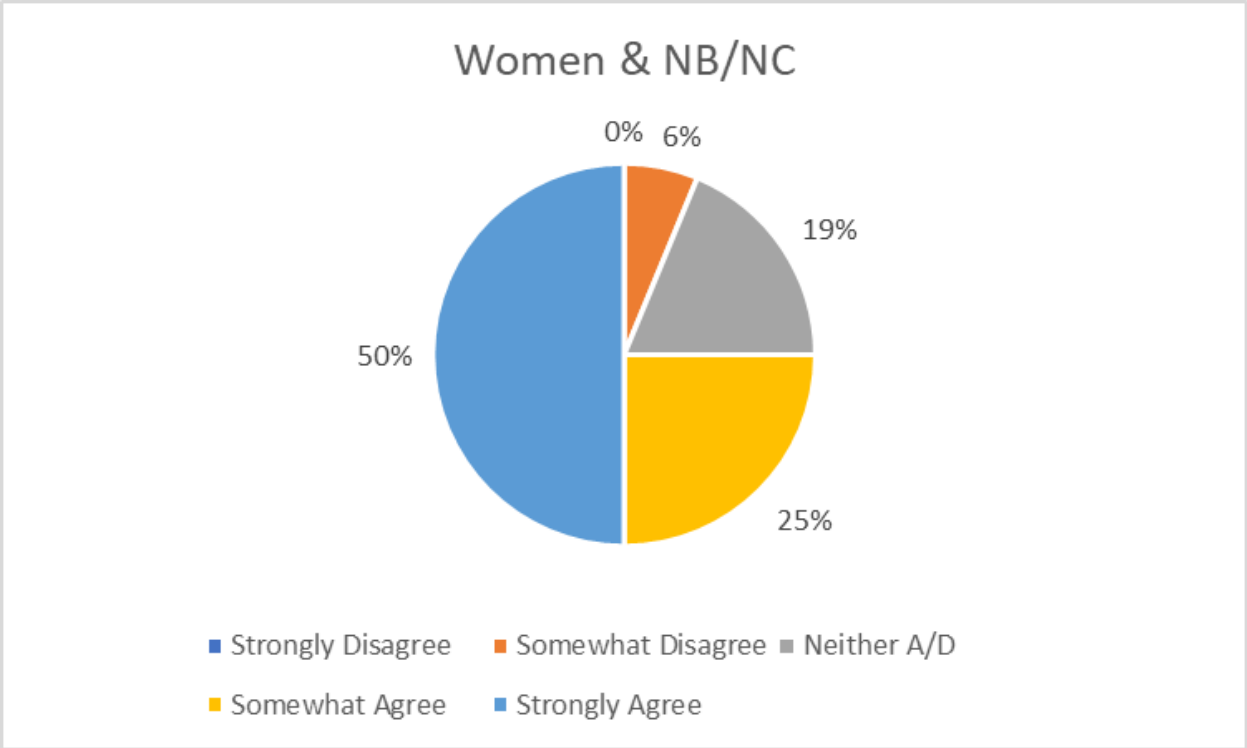


To the sixth statement, “male activists are taken more seriously than activists of other genders by the general public,” 73 percent ( $n = 2$ ;  $n = 6$ ) of male respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed compared to 75 percent ( $n = 8$ ;  $n = 4$ ) of women and nonbinary/nonconforming people. The remaining 27 percent ( $n = 3$ ) of male participants somewhat disagreed with this statement. 6 percent ( $n = 1$ ) of participants of other genders somewhat disagreed and the remaining 19 percent ( $n = 3$ ) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q3F. Male activists are taken more seriously than activists of other genders by the general public. (Men)

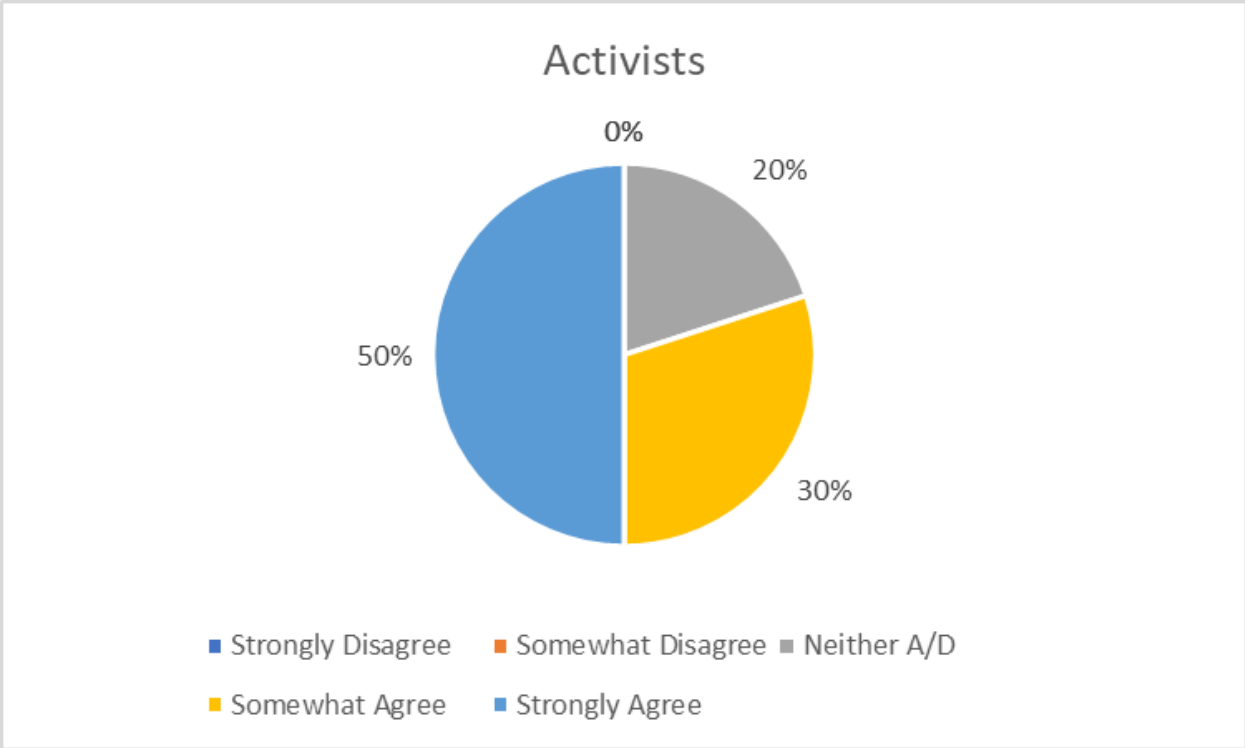


Q3F. Male activists are taken more seriously than activists of other genders by the general public.  
(Women & Nonbinary/Nonconforming)

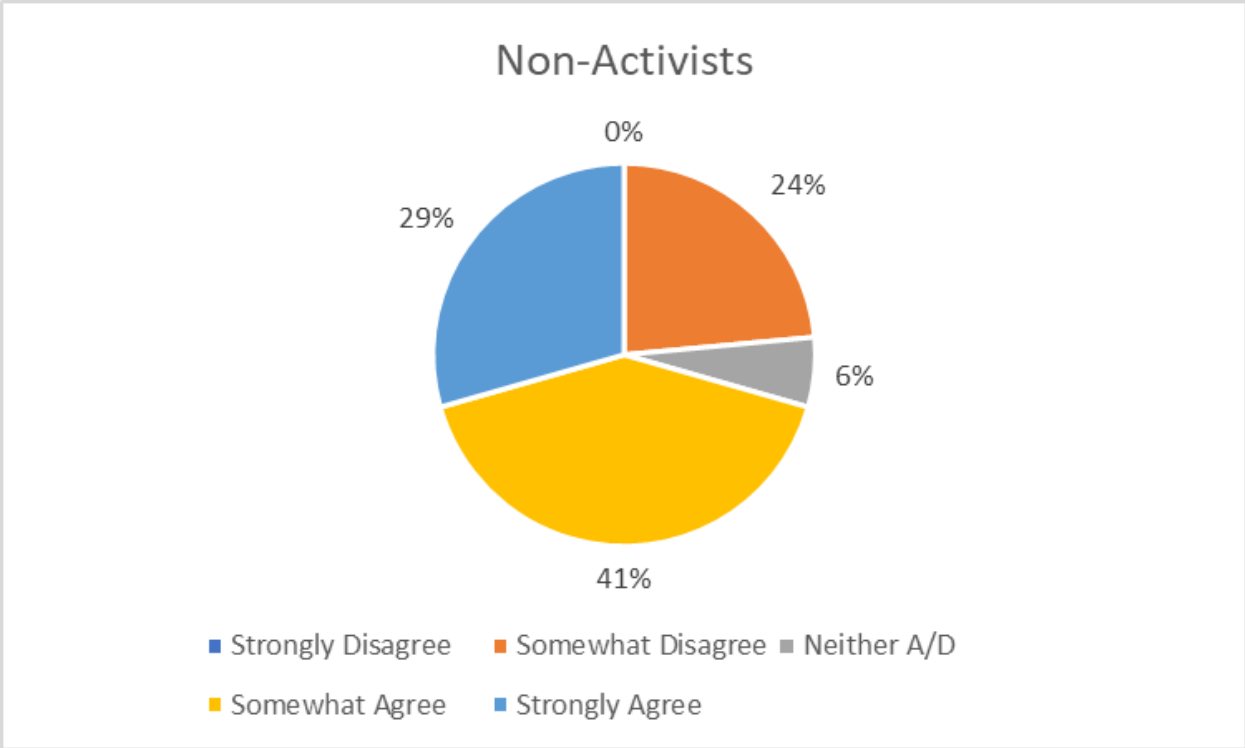


80 percent ( $n = 5$ ;  $n = 3$ ) of activists in the survey either strongly or somewhat agreed with this sixth statement and the remaining 20 percent ( $n = 2$ ) neither agreed nor disagreed. Still, a large majority of non-activists (70 percent,  $n = 5$ ;  $n = 7$ ) either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, with an additional 24 percent ( $n = 4$ ) somewhat disagreeing and the remaining 6 percent ( $n = 1$ ) neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Q3F. Male activists are taken more seriously than activists of other genders by the general public.  
(Activists)



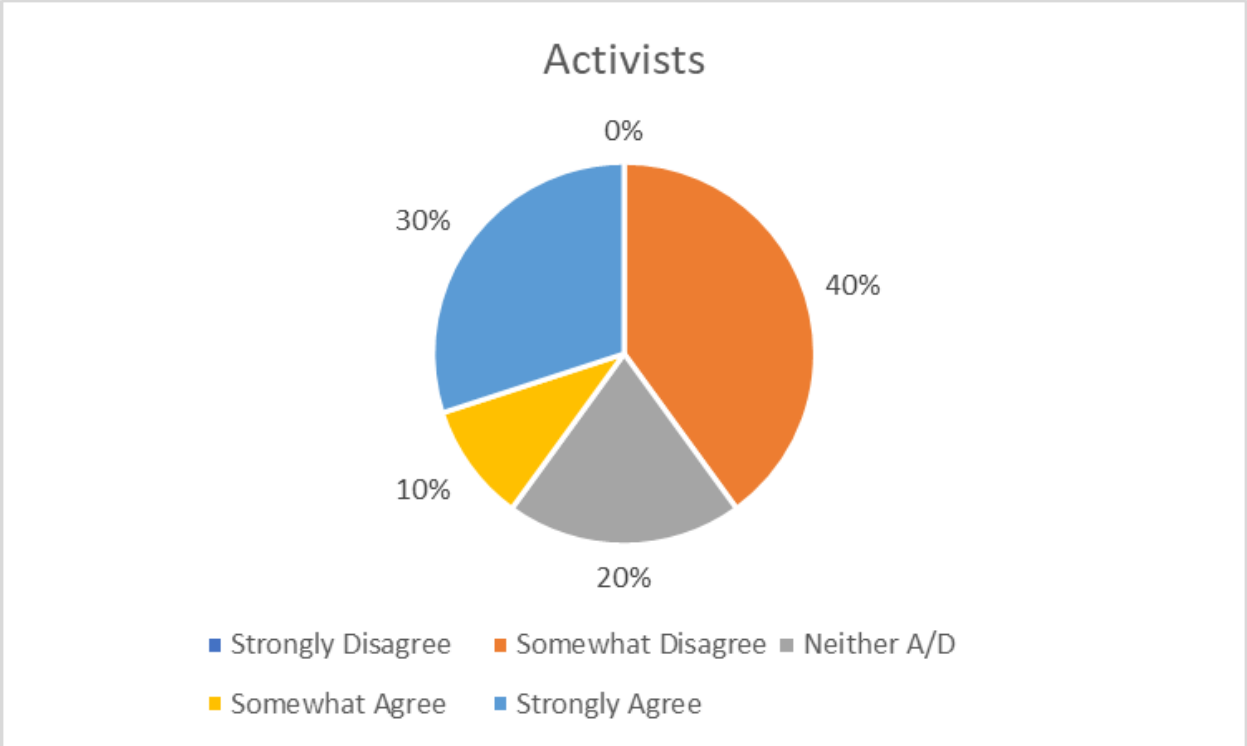
Q3F. Male activists are taken more seriously than activists of other genders by the general public.  
(Non-Activists)





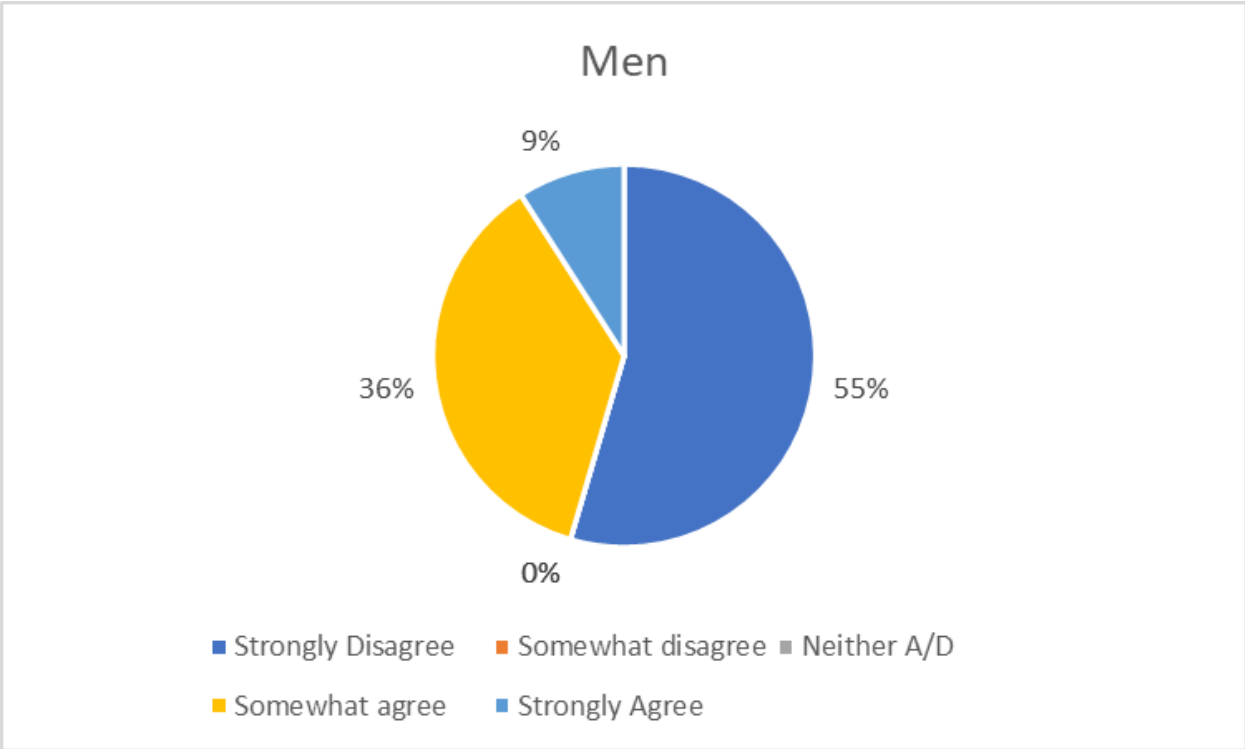
The seventh statement, “male activists are more well-known than activists of other genders within my activist space,” was only posed to respondents who are activists. A plurality of respondents somewhat disagreed (40 percent,  $n = 4$ ) with the statement, compared to 30 percent ( $n = 3$ ) who strongly agreed, 10 percent ( $n = 1$ ) who somewhat agreed, and the remaining 20 percent ( $n = 2$ ) who neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q3G. Male activists are more well-known than activists of other genders within my activist space.

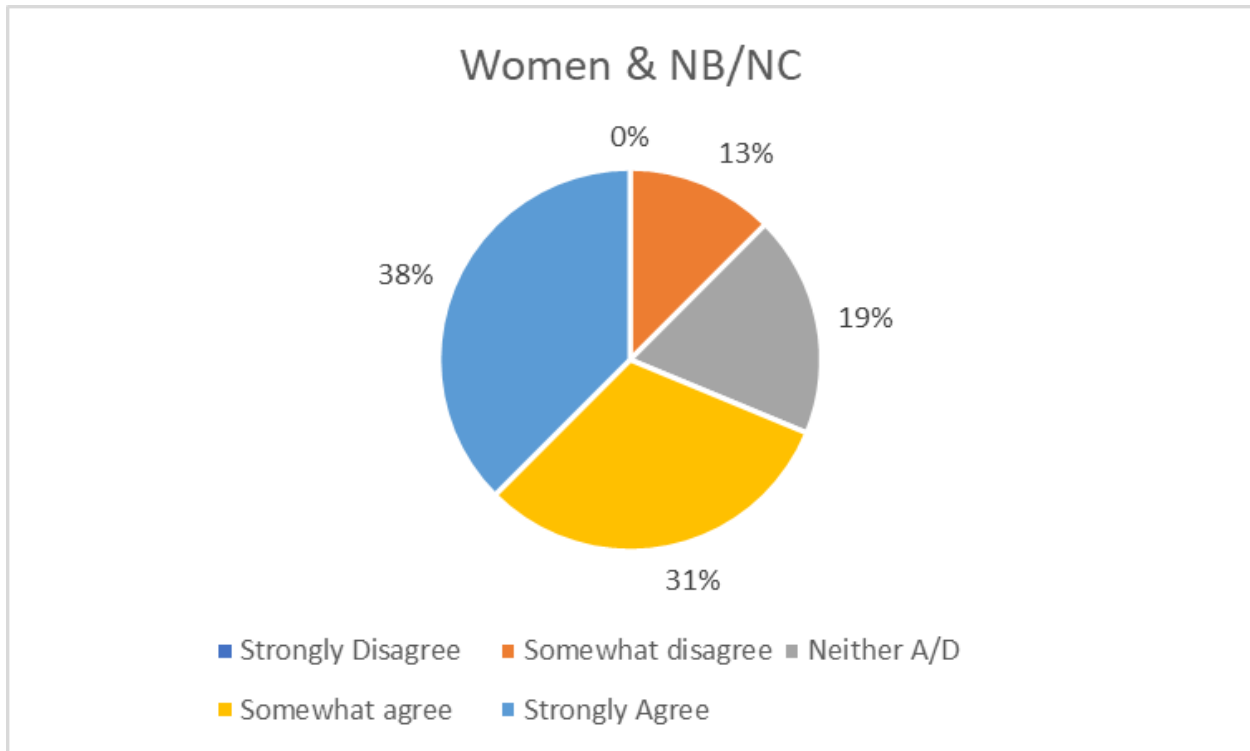


To the eighth and final statement, “male activists are more well-known than activists of other genders by the general public,” a majority (55 percent;  $n = 6$ ) of male respondents strongly disagreed compared to 13 percent of women and nonbinary/nonconforming people who only somewhat disagreed. The remaining 45 percent ( $n = 1$ ;  $n = 3$ ) of male participants either strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. A majority (69 percent,  $n = 6$ ;  $n = 5$ ) of participants of other genders either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement and the remaining 19 percent ( $n = 3$ ) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q3H. Male activists are more well-known than activists of other genders by the general public. (Men)

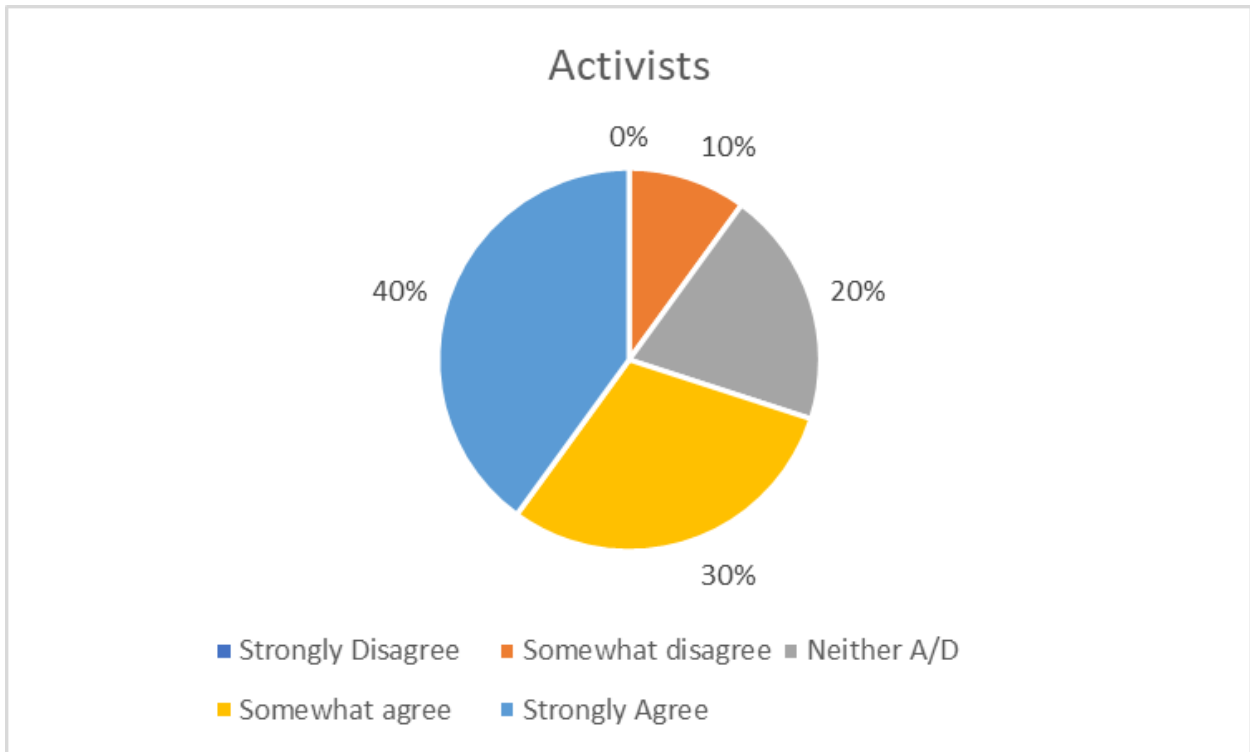


Q3H. Male activists are more well-known than activists of other genders by the general public. (Women & Nonbinary/Nonconforming)

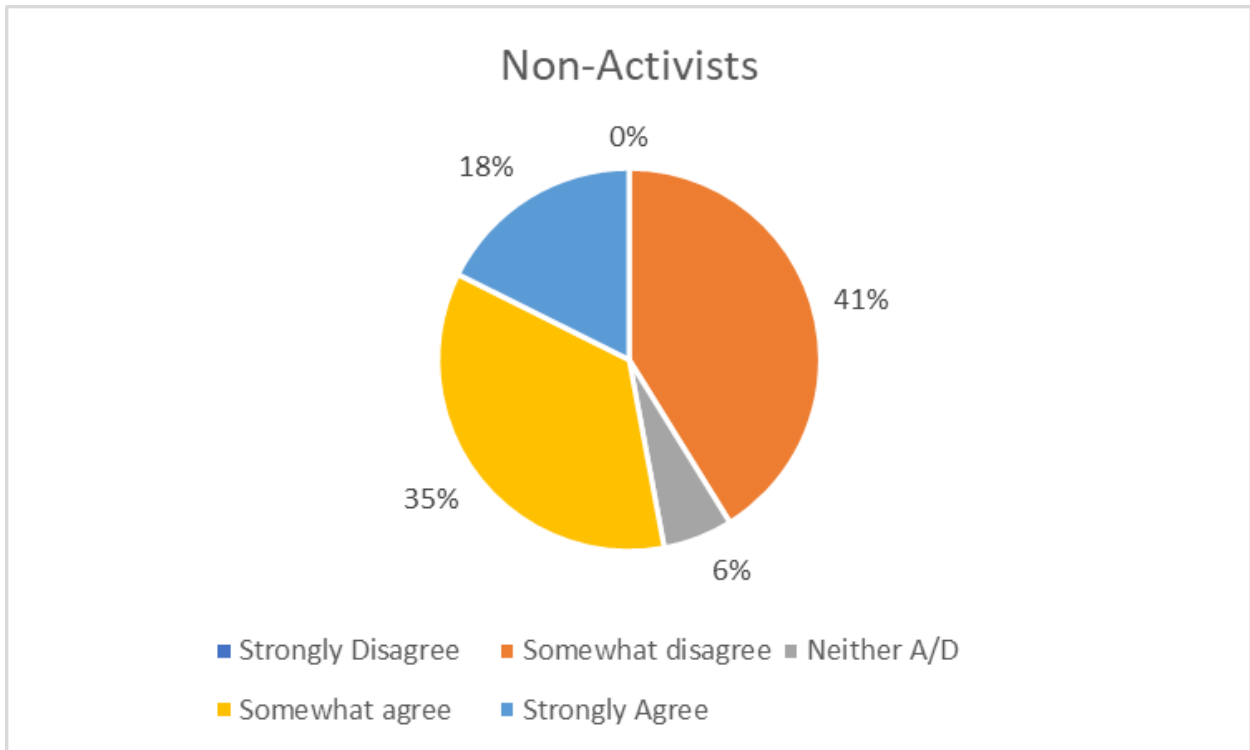


70 percent ( $n = 4$ ;  $n = 3$ ) of activists in the survey either strongly or somewhat agreed with this final statement, 10 percent ( $n = 1$ ) somewhat disagreed, and the remaining 20 percent ( $n = 2$ ) neither agreed nor disagreed. Still, a slim majority of non-activists (53 percent,  $n = 3$ ;  $n = 6$ ) either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, with an additional 41 percent ( $n = 7$ ) somewhat disagreeing and the remaining 6 percent ( $n = 1$ ) neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Q3H. Male activists are more well-known than activists of other genders by the general public. (Activists)



Q3H. Male activists are more well-known than activists of other genders by the general public. (Non-Activists)



## 4.2 Interview Findings

**Findings from interview 1:** In the experience of women vegan activists at tabling events, it is usually men who come up to other men and argue about veganism. Their presence is often overlooked. But the interviewee also talked about how it might be more challenging for men to be vegan as masculinity and eating meat have always been seen as related. Feminine people tend to have an easier time and give more support to veganism. Furthermore, a large number of vegans come from South Asian backgrounds because they already have the concept of vegetarianism. But the movement is often overtaken by white people or they are usually *seen* at the helm of it. The veggie jackets board has a male to female ratio of 1:5 but the group has recently had more involvement from men. Vegans unlike many other activists like animal rights are often hated.

**Findings from interview 2:** In the StopCopCity movement militant and non-militant strategies have co-existed. As a student applying for colleges, this interviewee often hesitates to participate in physical demonstrations. There is a lot of unity between different identities in this movement and he hasn't really faced any aggression during recruitment or tabling events like the previous interviewee. The cop city initiative is a perfect example of environmental racism and has brought people from all causes together. The organizers have had formal communications with the BLM movement. Even land defense initiatives have joined forces in StopCopCity. No one is really seen as representative of the movement and a diverse set of people have been involved. During most of his canvassing and recruitment hasn't really met with any aggression or rebuttal. Except people who have been involved in manufacturing consent no one usually reacts sourly to this movement. But he feels like his political identity has been shaped by this movement.

**Findings from Interview 3:** The third interview helped us get insights on the challenges activist organizations face on the Georgia Tech campus. We learnt the first challenge is in keeping an equal gender ratio, especially in the organizations which favor participants with technical skills. Even though the organization attempts to keep a neutral gender ratio, the unequal gender ratio on campus of the technical institute where this organization operates, makes keeping equal ratio challenging. This problem exacerbates when the organization tries to recruit participants who identify themselves to be non-binary. The systemic gender divide hence inadvertently introduces a lack of representation of all genders in the activist group. The effects are then observed in the organizational leadership which, despite being semi-structured, introduces unequal gender distribution in the organization. Despite the participants being largely male, there exists diversity in the sexual orientation of the participants. We also found that most of the prominent activists in the field of effective altruism tend to be male which corroborates to the previous studies carried out in other fields of social activism. Finally, we found that the activist group prefers to recruit and communicate to the interested individuals through a personal forum instead of a social media platform which has a wider audience which is contrary to what has been found in literature where activists try to mobilize through large scale social media campaigns. This difference, we believe, could be due to the goal and targeted audience which prefers to engage with only college students instead of global audiences across the world.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this section, we reflect on the lessons learnt through the survey and the interviews in tandem.

The first interesting result of our study is the empirical evidence that identity has a role to play in the intrinsic motivation of individuals to participate in social activism. Based on our survey results, we found that around 80% belonged to historically marginalized gender groups and another 80% participants themselves agree that their decision to pursue activism stems from their identity. Identity, however, does not always have a motivational role in participation of the individual in social activism. As illustrated by the second interviewee, we find that identity is also a source of hesitancy among individuals deciding to participate in social activism. This is exacerbated for individuals who are immigrants and are afraid to get their legal status impacted by participating in demonstrations and activism.

The next major finding of our study is that around 44% of our respondents who participated in activism felt discrimination within their activism space. The reasons for this became more apparent to us through the interviews. Through the interviewee 1, we found that even though the organization itself is very inclusive with a higher proportion of women activists, they feel invisible and overlooked when discussion is taking place or whenever race becomes a factor in the perception of organizational leadership. Similarly, Interviewee 3 suggests why the background of the institution itself limits the participation of one gender over the other, particularly in activist organizations that are technical in nature and thus engender exclusionary spaces.

Our final observation of the study is the correlation between identity and the perception of the social activism space itself. We find that while 18% of the men activists strongly agree that males are taken more seriously in the activist space, 50% of the women activists strongly agree to the same statement. Apart from being taken seriously, there is an overarching influence of the male gender within the activist space. Even though only 9% of the males agreed that males are more widely known in the activist space, 38% of the females agreed to that fact. Moreover, we find that even during the interviews, when we asked participants to name prominent actors in their activist communities, the participants named mostly prominent male activists. This imbalance alludes to the fact that gender plays an active role in the perception of leadership, involvement, and participation in social activism spaces despite those spaces being largely guided or dominated by the marginalized and the underrepresented individuals.

In our study, we examine the role of identity in social activism. We find that identity is an important reason for an individual's choice to participate in social activism. We also find that there exists a hesitation for some individuals to participate in social movements because participation in the social movements is seen as subversive and may have negative implications on a person's future. This conundrum leads to a difference in power dynamics within the activist space which makes some individuals who belong to the historically oppressed groups feel discriminated against, despite being in a space meant to help them feel liberated. Finally, we find that male leaders are more prominent as compared to female and non-binary activists. We believe this is caused by the "masculinized" perception of leadership in general and has an overarching effect in the field of social activism as well. Through our

work, we wish to initiate conversations around individual hesitance to participate in social activism, the notoriety of prominent non-male activists in the community, and practices to create more liberatory spaces that encourage all individuals to participate in such movements. Our work also seeks to create more recognition for female activists and activists from the other genders for more equitable leadership perception, which could act as an inspiration for younger individuals to participate in such causes and help drive change through their work.

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