We are grateful to Dina Bell-Laroche of the Sport Law & Strategy Group for analyzing the CAAWS data and interviewing the 17 sport leaders who shared their insights and stories in support of gender-equitable boards.

Participants in the interviews included:

• Richard Creppin, President, Gymnastics Canada
• Terry Dillon, CEO, Rowing Canada
• Daniel Dussault, Chairperson, Ringette Canada
• Ahmed El-Awadi, CEO, Swimming Canada
• Rob Guy, CEO, Athletics Canada
• Katherine Henderson, CEO, Curling Canada
• Natasha Johnston, Executive Director, Ringette Canada
• Ashley Labrie, Executive Director, AthletesCAN
• Lorraine Lafrenière, CEO, Coaching Association of Canada
• Bill MacMackin, President, Athletics Canada
• Brian MacPherson, CEO, Commonwealth Games Canada
• Paul Melia, CEO, Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport
• Ann Peel, Vice-President, Athletics Canada
• Dasha Peregoudova, Chairperson, AthletesCAN
• Richard Powers, Chairperson, Commonwealth Games Canada
• Carol Purcer, President, Rowing Canada
• Peter Nicol, CEO (former), Gymnastics Canada

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INTRODUCTION

At the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), we support—and aim to lead on—Sport Canada’s objective of achieving gender equity in sport at all levels by 2035. We believe it begins at the top: ensuring gender-equitable boards of directors.

This resource provides sport leaders with information and tips to enhance good practices or dial up efforts to support gender-equitable boards.

The recommendations shared in this resource were informed and inspired by:

- Insights shared by Canadian sport leaders whose organizations have women representing 40-60% of the board directors
- CAAWS documents and comparative analysis of CAAWS research looking at the number of female directors and executive directors/CEOs between 2015 and 2018
- Promising practices from other organizations with expertise on inclusive governance
- A review of relevant literature
MAKING THE CASE FOR GENDER-EQUITABLE BOARDS

Research tells a compelling story of the impact that women have when serving as directors. While most of the research is based on for-profit organizations, it is nonetheless relevant to the non-profit sector, including sport and physical activity.¹

Board gender diversity is a matter of good business as much as it is an issue of fairness according to the Canadian Gender and Good Governance Alliance.²

Some compelling stats to illustrate this include:

- Organizations with gender-diverse boards and senior leadership teams consistently outperform their peers financially.³

- Moreover, organizations with two or more women on boards had stronger performances six years later than those with all-male boards. These boards also considered different performance measures, looking to evaluate against strategy, reputation, and culture.⁴

- A balanced number of women and men on boards expands innovation by ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered and mitigating the risk of ‘group think’, particularly when faced with complex decisions.⁵

- Organizations who seek women for their boards are tapping into a larger pool of top talent than they would otherwise, and organizations with women on their boards have the added benefit of being more effective at recruiting and retaining excellent employees.⁶

By prioritizing gender equity at the highest level, boards lead by example and help to create the conditions for equity to be achieved throughout the organization.

“There are huge benefits in having gender-balanced boards. Women bring a different lens to the conversation that we would never have otherwise. As a result, we get better solutions.”

Lorraine Lafrenière, CEO, Coaching Association of Canada
Effective and innovative leadership takes advantage of best practices and emerging opportunities, one of which is achieving a gender-equitable board. We have developed the following checklist with ideas and approaches under each item to provide you with a roadmap that addresses common barriers organizations face when recruiting and retaining women on their boards. While these suggestions have been mined from sport organizations with proven success and from the literature, it is important that you customize them to consider your organization’s values, culture, state of readiness and commitment level.

CHECKLIST FOR CHANGE

Intentional leadership

Leading in today’s complex world isn’t easy. Ensuring that you can address the complexities in a manner that responds to the expectations of your members and meets standards of good practice will help support your organization’s goals. Doing so in a manner that aligns with your values requires thoughtful and intentional leadership.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Source your organization’s values when referencing the importance of having a gender diverse board.
- Set a vision. Many sport leaders share that sport organizations need to reflect the mosaic that is Canada.
- Review your current board demographics to determine if you fall within the 40-60% gender balance, which is recognized as an established good practice. While sport leaders can acknowledge that they strive for an equal number of men and women, the 40-60% range allows for greater flexibility in the event an even number of directors isn’t the case.
- Determine what the appetite for change is within your board culture. Have the conversations with your directors and ask them to consider the risks of not meeting the recommended range.
- Invite a governance consultant to share the benefits of gender diversity.
- Identify directors and other leaders who can speak to the benefits of having more women on your board.
- Create a committee to support your work. Develop a strategy. Set goals. Be public about your commitment to become a gender-equitable board.

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Many sport organizations have made great strides, and many more still have room to improve. For those that have already signaled their commitment to gender-equitable boards, setting a target range that allows for fluctuations in board size, while promoting a philosophy of gender balance is critical to moving the dial closer to parity.

Some methods to do so include:

- If you have less than 40% of women on your Board, consider accelerating your change initiative by creating a sense of urgency among stakeholders. Often, a conversation is enough to get started. For instance, be clear in your communications that you are looking for women when you issue your Call for Nominations. Add the topic of gender inclusivity on your next board meeting. Target young leaders and provide them with an opportunity to get their feet wet by joining a committee, as this is a great way for them to get acclimated to the world of governance.

- Develop a mechanism to monitor and measure the organization’s progress in achieving its desired outcomes at each board meeting. For instance, consider setting a target for how many women you would like involved in all parts of your organization. Setting targets allows the organization to set priorities, assign roles and responsibilities, and signals a commitment to stakeholders that they are taking this seriously.

- Formal board evaluation processes, often administered by the governance committee or external consultant, provide an opportunity to assess the board’s approach to gender diversity, and to identify where improvements can be made. Some questions to consider include:
  1. Have we clearly stated our commitment to becoming a gender diverse board?
  2. Do we have processes in place to ensure that women make up a minimum of 40% of our directors within the next X years, and on an ongoing basis?
  3. To what extent does our nominations process identify board-ready women with the skill set, fit and commitment that we need?
  4. How can we make our processes better?
  5. How do we feel about sharing our progress with others? Will we report on our numbers at our AGM? In what ways can we encourage our national or provincial, territorial and community sport partners to also adopt gender-balanced board practices?
Recognizing the importance of leadership reflecting its members and global trends, Rugby Canada’s Board of Directors and Provincial Unions supported a motion ensuring that its governance will be comprised of no less than 40% of either men or women. “I’ve been working with World Rugby on their Women’s Committee and they have recognized Canada as a leader in gender equality. Our Board of Directors and Provinces have worked tirelessly to grow the number of strong female voices in Rugby Canada’s leadership over the last five years, and today we’ve made it official moving forward.”

Katherine Henderson, Rugby Canada Vice Chairperson and CEO, Curling Canada

“We overhauled the process last year. I chaired the Nominations Committee and we developed a skills matrix, tracked the number of women and men that were eligible; communicated our commitment to being inclusive of males, females and para. Prior to then, we were too the same. Our networks tend to reflect who we are on the Board, so we need to be more intentional about that. Stated simply we said: ‘Let’s have our board look like a track meet.’”

Ann Peel, Vice Chair of Athletics Canada.
Acknowledging the trend toward more inclusive practices, Swimming Canada CEO Ahmed El-Awadi spent time learning about the sport and understanding its culture before making changes. “I had to observe the culture at our meets, on our committees and in the office. I noticed that women weren’t holding the same positions as men and some were being overlooked. Things started to change … and now, it’s just our practice. I believe that if you say you are going to be an open organization, then you must BE an open organization.”

Ahmed El-Awadi, CEO, Swimming Canada
Sport leaders should assess their current governance structure and the documents that support it to ensure it is not only meeting legal requirements but also achieving good practices.

This includes:

✔ Review your by-laws to ensure they are not restricting your objective of a 40-60% gender-balanced board. For instance, some organizations have minimums set at 25% and once this is met, the organization no longer feels the need to do more.

✔ Set term-limits for board members to ensure that new perspectives are regularly introduced. This should also ensure that boards have succession plans in place and methods to transfer knowledge to new directors.

✔ Develop a skills matrix that includes gender as one of the key considerations—even criteria—and review it yearly to factor in your organization’s strategic direction. Of note, sport leaders indicate that the qualities that make Boards of Directors effective have little to do with their resumés or how well they know the technical side of the sport. Traits shared among men and women include understanding the needs of membership, being clear on their role as director, being a good communicator, keeping an open mind, active listening, and having an inclusive mindset.

✔ Conduct a gender audit to ensure that your organization’s rules, policies and procedures are not unintentionally excluding women. As part of this process, speak with women currently engaged with the board or on committees to better understand their experiences, opportunities and barriers.

✔ Clearly communicate your organization’s commitment to a gender-balanced board—to your Nominations Committee, board applicants and other stakeholders. Ensure you have gender balance in the composition of your Nominations Committee and strive to put forward the same number of women and men when producing a slate of directors. Maintaining a minimum of 40% female directors may require an entirely or predominantly female list of candidates if the spots available were previously held by women.

✔ Create a gender diversity policy with an implementation plan that signal your board’s commitment to inclusive practices.
Create an inviting culture

Strong governing boards are willing to share the trials and tribulations of their pathway to achieving a gender-equitable board.

Good practices in this regard include:

☑️ Review your board practices and culture to ensure it is promoting a flexible and inclusive environment for board members. For instance, consider hosting meetings during conventional work hours and offer financial support for childcare if weekend or evening meetings are required.

☑️ If there are outdated mindsets among the board that resist including more women, address them specifically: Point out the compelling research that highlights the benefits of having more women on boards, recognize that sponsors increasingly support organizations that reflect diversity of perspectives in leadership, and understand that responding to societal expectations of fairness and equity ensures organizations remain current.

☑️ Review your communications to ensure you are intentionally using gender-inclusive language in all your board communications including your by-laws, processes, policies and procedures.

☑️ Ensure equal speaking opportunities for all directors and showcase both genders as leaders in communications, images and leadership opportunities.

☑️ When you host your board orientation session, include an opportunity for people to express why they are serving as directors. Asking a ‘why’ question helps people better understand each other’s motivations and serves to forge stronger relationships based on shared values.

“...I think we are the most inclusive organization I’ve ever been a part of. Not only in how we recruit board members but also the way we encourage the membership to live the values of inclusivity and diversity. In terms of gender, we have had a very good balance, and if anything, we have more women on our board. Because diversity is one of our key values, we are always driving this at the forefront. Our definition of excellence is that athletes thrive within a culture of diversity.”

Dasha Peregoudova, Chair, Athletes CAN
To achieve gender-balanced boards, leaders need to carefully map out a strategy to seek out qualified female candidates. This ideally includes creating and sustaining a ‘pipeline’ of board-ready female candidates.

Some proactive actions may include:

✔ Once you have identified the skills required, create a board-ready list for potential female candidates. Organizations such as the Institute of Corporate Directors and CAAWS can recommend women from various sectors who might fit the profile you are looking for in future board candidates.

✔ Often, women will not apply for relevant positions, so inviting them to apply is a good tactic. Research has shown that women are less likely to apply for a job unless she meets or exceeds all the criteria, while men will apply if they meet some of the requirements. With this in mind, consider nurturing a list of possible ‘evergreen’ candidates that you consider over a longer period. This will also support you when you have unplanned vacancies to fill or are looking for specific skillsets to advance your mission.

✔ Consider looking beyond your sport to recruit other possible female candidates. This could mean female representation from a different sport and/or even a non-sport person joining your board. Having an external, non-industry specific perspective can be a tremendous asset to your board discussion and heighten your risk management efforts. Let athletes know that one option for them to stay involved post-retirement is to develop their leadership capacity by joining a committee. Many good candidates are first groomed as committee members before becoming board members.
The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport’s commitment to a gender-equitable board has been entrenched since the creation of the organization. “The Chair and I meet with all possible candidates based on their areas of expertise to share our corporate philosophy and the time commitments of serving on the board. If fit is established, we follow up with a subsequent meeting around our strategic priorities and our key areas of work. We also provide an informal board mentorship program to help support new recruits, a Board Orientation Package and offer professional development to enhance board capacity. I think we take a more holistic approach to ensuring our board is as effective as possible and it is very much part of our corporate culture at CCES to be inclusive.”

Paul Melia, CEO, Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport

“We had a legacy of rowing being male, white, and older. While this is shifting, it’s still a significant part of our sport. It’s hard to shed that without being deliberate and intentional. I remember speaking to someone who was considering applying for a Director position and her comment was - ‘when I look at the board of RCA, I’m not sure I would fit into this group or even if I want to be part of it’ - if our sport is to grow and thrive we have to continue to work to change this perspective.”

Terry Dillon, CEO, Rowing Canada
Supporting new and existing board members to be effective in their roles is important for creating an inclusive board culture. Good practices in this regard include:

- Provide new board members with a mentor that they can turn to during the first year. Women enjoy learning through conversation and feel supported when they can turn to a trusted advisor for advice. Outgoing board members and other senior leaders in sport often welcome the opportunity to mentor the next generation.

- Consider training opportunities for your board members to ensure they have the required board literacy to serve as fiduciaries. While this should be made available to all directors, women may be more likely to step forward if they know that the organization proactively provides education and training.

Provide mentoring and training opportunities
Leading change is never easy. It requires a compelling vision, a fierce resolve, an open mind, a clear strategy, and patience. CAAWS is here to support your efforts in building organizations that are equitable and inclusive, enabling you to reap the great benefits offered by diverse talents and perspectives. We believe this advice from sport leaders who have gender-equitable boards will serve to inspire and help you improve your organization.

A truly inclusive sport sector reflects the voices of all people who come together to achieve excellence. The evidence is compelling. The path is clear. Let’s get started!

**What’s Next?**

We want to hear from you!

As you create and hone equitable practices in your organization, please share them with us so we can spread this learning to others.
The following documents were reviewed as part of a review of relevant literature on the topic of gender inclusive governance practices:

- Catalyst. Solutions From the Boardroom For the Boardroom. Catalyst.

For sport leaders looking for additional resources to support moving towards gender-equitable boards, consider the following websites, which were reviewed as part of our research to help identify promising practices:

- CAAWS: http://www.caaws.ca/
- Women in Sport: http://www.womeninsport.org/
- Catalyst: http://www.catalyst.org/
- Canadian Gender and Good Governance Alliance: https://www.cggga.ca/
- Sport Law & Strategy Group: www.sportlaw.ca/
- The Governance Solutions: https://www.governancesolutions.ca/

1 The following documents were reviewed as part of a review of relevant literature on the topic of gender inclusive governance practices:
   - Catalyst. Solutions From the Boardroom For the Boardroom. Catalyst.

2 Ibid. P.6.
3 Conference Board of Canada: https://utsc.utoronto.ca/~phanira/WebResearchMethods/women-bod&fp-conference%20board.pdf