



Women in Sports Governance Research Insights

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Problem

Sport, active recreation and play organisations often lament how difficult it is to attract and engage women onto their boards.

So, as part of the application process for the Women in Governance 2021 campaign, we asked each of the 190 applicants:

What are two things sporting organisations can do to make their board roles more appealing to women?



Aim

Our aim was to collect instinctive thoughts relating to sports governance and appointment processes, to understand:

- What would make women more likely to apply for board roles within the broader sport sector
- What women believed were the barriers to participation
- Women's perceptions of sport sector boards



Insight Summary

Ten key insights emerged from the 190 applicants who voluntarily responded to the question:

Pre-application

1. We want to see more visibility of women in sports governance
2. We want more practical support to get on sports boards

Applications are more likely if:

4. There are **already women on the board**
5. We are the **advert and its language appeals**, and the **recruitment process** is clear
6. We see you have a **commitment to your Women in Sport** strategy
7. We think we fit the criteria for appointment

On Appointment

7. We want to see more **inclusive board culture**
8. We need more **flexible meeting** arrangements

Future

10. We see **gender diversity as a starting point**. We want broader diversity on boards, such as ethnicity and age.



1 – Visibility

Some respondents lack female role models in governance. They have never seen women playing leadership roles within sports organisations, so they didn't think that was possible for them either.

“I think the hardest part for me is not having examples of what strong female leadership in governance looks like, the lack of role models makes it easy to second guess yourself.”

“Consistently promote and highlight successful board women and share their journey to governance (make it tangible and allow women to see the path is wide and clear for others to walk the same path).”

“Have more women visible on boards and as Chairs to make it feel like we're not entering a 'boys club'”

“I've been playing football for over 20 years and the thought (of board roles) never even entered my head because I never saw women in positions of leadership when I was young. I've never received the message that this is something I'm capable of doing or that I am encouraged to do”



2 – Practical Support

Many respondents said that applying for male dominated bodies is intimidating. Providing practical opportunities like governance training, networking, mentors and board internships could assist more women to join boards.

“Sporting bodies are historically male dominated so it can be a daunting role for a women to apply for. By providing support in the form of mentors, hands on training or course designed for women in leadership it can erode those barriers”

“Facilitate opportunities to learn and network with current female board members to make the position seem less daunting”

“Provide governance training and opportunities for young emerging female leaders”

“Invite them in. It is overwhelming and daunting for a women to open the door to a board room herself, for fear of judgement. Have an open conversation with younger generations from sport and include individuals from diverse backgrounds.”



3 – Women Attract More Women

Respondents said being the only women on a board is challenging, lonely and uncomfortable – you have to fight for your opinions to be heard. Having other women on the board already, made the role more attractive.

“Having more women on boards would make it easier for other women to feel more comfortable – quite simple really!”

“Increase the number of women so it does not feel like a token and lonely voice.”

“I also feel there is a ‘tipping point’ on boards – being a sole female board member is challenging sometimes, whereas on boards where 50% are women, in my experience, work better”

“I believe having more women in roles such as this will create a pathway for more young girls to see this as a role worthy of pursuing without the fear of being the only women sitting at the table fighting for her voice/opinions to be valued and heard.”

“The roles is more appealing when the board is already diverse. Being able to show the diversity of the board makes it appealing to join.”

“Females attract females!”



4 – Recruitment Processes

Respondents said that recruitment processes and information is not always clear or helpful. Language should be chosen carefully. Advertising needs to be broader, utilizing multiple platforms and media. Many suggested that directly approaching women in a good way to find the right people for boards.

“Demystify the process as it can seem quite daunting”

“Advertise – I only stumbled upon this opportunity by mistake.”

“review board recruitment and/or advertisement processes, making sure the language is attractive to women”

“Open and transparent appointment processes – ability to connect with people already on the board to get some insight into the board culture and their openness to diversity of thought.”

“Ensure that the way they pose, and market board roles is done in a way that is attractive and accepted by women. There are ways in which language can be used to be more attractive, less threatening and more readily accepted by women.”

“Sport can often feel like a “boys club” and its important to specifically identify and target a diverse range of women whose perspective will only improve the culture of an organisations from the top down. It’s not often I see another young Pasifika women in the boardroom like myself so I’d like to see this improve.”



5 – Policy and Strategy Commitments

Respondents commented that more women will be interested in joining a board if the sport has a commitment to women and girls sport from grassroots to elite AND if this commitment is firmly established in policy, strategy and measured by KPIs.

“Some sport organisations in general are still operating in an environment that advocates and assists just males. Working in sport management and as an official, it is hard to try and get more females involved when even as an experienced participant I see a lot of this.”

“The existing board members need to be genuinely committed to the Women and Girls Strategy. If they are simply “going along with it” because it’s a mandate from Sport NZ then the new female board members may be met with resistance and therefore an inability to bring about real positive change to the organisation. I feel this is an opportunity for each board to look at its culture so that the behaviours that truly support equity are seen around the table.”

“Acknowledge that future strategy and growth opportunities for many sports (particularly ones that have traditionally been male-dominated) come from a focus on girls/women development and pathways and making the sport equally accessible for both genders.”



6 – Criteria For Appointment

Respondents said there should be less emphasis on selecting those with a connection to the sport, and to be open to appointing those with less governance experience, but with potential to grow in to the role.

“Less focus on sporting interest/knowledge/participation and increase recognition of governance skills to contribute to the organisation.”

“Consider people who aren’t traditionally involved in the sport – in my opinion it could bring diverse thinking to the table.”

“Give women an opportunity if they don’t have much experience – we know that women won’t put themselves forward if they don’t feel qualified. With less than 20% female board members in NZ, we need to build a group of women ready to move into these roles.”

“Secondly, acknowledge that research shows women only apply for roles when they think they can do 100% of a role (men apply when they think they can do 60%) so adapt board role advertising processes to accommodate this.”



7 – Inclusive Board Culture

Many respondents do not find board cultures inclusive, in terms of being welcomed, listened to and ideas respected. Some say that boards and management teams need training in diversity, inclusion, equity and equality.

“One part of this is setting and determining cultural values of the board (and organisation) and ensuring these are strongly represented from the top down.”

“Make the board environment more welcoming”

“I have found from experience that men can sometimes control boards and do not listen to all voices around the table.”

“Demonstrate an active commitment to inclusion of womens views and values (not just diversity)”

“Encourage men to realise that women bring a different and quality perspective to a board.”

“Be willing to accept new ideas from a feminine viewpoint.”

“Be welcoming of all opinions and not speak in a condescending manner to us.”

“Do not expect the female to carry out administrative work by default.”



8 – Meeting Flexibility

Respondents said that women have difficulty finding the time for board roles, given family and work responsibilities. Parental commitments often clashed with meeting times. There is a perception that women will be ‘looked down on’ for having family commitments, whereas prioritising a business commitment is acceptable.

“More flexible meeting times and platforms.”

“Being cognisant that women are generally the primary caregiver and being accommodating of this when setting meeting times.”

“If my application gets accepted, I have 2 young kids, which make me nervous to wonder whether male board members would look down on me as a part-time working mum (bottom of society’s food chain) even though I know I am intelligent and capable. If I have to miss a meeting because of sick kids, will they dismiss me as unimportant? If they have to miss a meeting because of a work commitment, will they do the same?”

“Barriers to Governance in my opinion are catch-22 – it’s hard to get onto a board without experience and many women struggle to find time when balancing multiple day jobs to get into smaller governance roles.”

“Flexible meeting times e.g. lunch time meetings instead of the usual 5.30 – 7.30pm board meetings which can be difficult for women as it coincides with dinnertime for children.”

“One factor would be flexible locations of board meetings – so allowing people to attend by zoom on occasion.”

“Appreciation that women are often juggling multiple commitments (both work and family) so providing sufficient time for governance papers to be read.”



9 – Good Governance

Many respondents said that a board role would be more appealing if they had confidence of a good experience once appointed. They said a sound induction, timely meeting papers, efficient meetings, terms limits and regular board evaluations would go a long way towards this.

“Show alignment with the Sport NZ Governance Mark best practice – the journey they are on to being professional.”

“The women I know are very busy people so if they have the capacity to do sports board roles that need things run efficiently. E.g. Board papers delivered early so they can juggle around other commitments meetings to run on time with clear outcome”

“Be more strategic and less down in day to day operations”.

“Improve induction processes on boards, providing new members with the appropriate information”

“Board positions should be refreshed after a maximum of (for e.g.) two terms to keep the members fresh and encourage new thinking regularly. It would be easier knowing that you didn’t need to combat long held beliefs or attitudes that you would need to work through in order for your contribution to be welcomed.”



10 – It's Broader than Gender Diversity

Several respondents noted that achieving gender diversity on sports boards is a good start but that “Boards should look more like the communities they represent.” Ethnicity and age diversity were two further goals respondents cited as important.

“Personally I think we need to embrace not only gender diversity but actual diversity, gender is only part of the challenge.”

“However I think diversity is integral to any team. It's about the people. He aha te mea nui o te ao. He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.”

“Have a true balance of diversity both gender and culture. One or two people from a minority is not enough to have their voices heard.”

“Leadership that also represents diversity.”

“Have more representation of women on boards and a diverse range of women, a range of ethnicities as well as young and old. Boards should look more like the communities' that they represent. How are young girls or women to envision themselves in a sport or in leadership if they do not see that reflected in the leadership also?”

“Show they are interested and committed to diversity within their organisations as a whole, with gender diversity just being one aspect of this.”



Conclusion

- Women in Sports Governance applicants provided:
 - Ideas on areas that could consider for further programming in the Women in Sports space, particularly at the pre-application stage.
 - A wero (challenge) to not stop at gender equality but to continue influencing the sector to appoint boards' that look more like the communities they represent.”

Pre-application

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Future

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Conclusion *contin...*

- Women in Sports Governance applicants provided:
 - Many simple and practical recommendations for boards on their approach to manaakitanga, communications, recruitment and governance processes
 - A wero to take forward work and conversations towards building a more inclusive board culture.

Applications are more likely if

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On Appointment

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8. We need more **flexible meeting arrangements**
9. We want **good governance practices**



Next Steps

1. Sport NZ may like to engage Appoint to develop a detailed report outlining recommendations, options and advice for adopting and implementing these insights
2. Appoint will feedback these insights to the Women In Sport Governance group via its regular communications



Kia Ora

