

## Increasing Women's Leadership in Canada: How to Present an Effective Case for Sport

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Never one to shy away from taking a strong position on controversial issues affecting women in sport, Guylaine Demers once again tackles a sensitive topic; in this instance, why women's leadership must accelerate if we are to build a healthy, inclusive Canadian sport system. Citing verifiable statistics and arguing that diversity is strength, she provides four scenarios that pose common questions and provide thoughtful answers. She challenges all of us to contribute to creating a world which values and welcomes the contributions of women as leaders in all spheres of sport. - Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

*The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.*

### **BREAKING NEWS: JUDO CANADA A LEADERSHIP GROUNDBREAKER**

#### **ASSISTANT NATIONAL COACH (female applicants only)**

Judo Canada is currently seeking a female Assistant National Coach (ANC) to help implement Judo Canada's High Performance plan and prepare its national team for medal performances at the 2024 and 2028 Olympic Games.

(<https://sirc.ca/careers/2019-09-25/assistant-national-coach-female-applicants-only-judo-canada>)

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## Increasing Women's Leadership in Canada: How to Present an Effective Case for Sport

By Guylaine Demers

### **Introduction**

Reflecting on my many years of involvement in sport, I am convinced that certain issues relating to gender equity remain misunderstood, and even taboo. It strikes me that often those wanting to advance the gender equity agenda are ill-equipped to do so and need to be supported as they defend the importance of women's advancement in leadership positions within their sport community. Lacking appropriate information results in a "speechless syndrome", which occurs when one doesn't know how best to counter a negative response to a request for involving more women. The response may take many forms: an excuse tinted with stereotypes such as not enough competent women being available; the claim that women lack interest in the position; a point of law that suggests it is discrimination to reserve a position for a woman; or a misconception about the usefulness of quotas versus hiring the best person.

In this article, I present arguments that are intended to enable positive reactions to such comments and to debunk certain persistent myths. These arguments should support defenders of the involvement of women by equipping them with strong evidence-based arguments. I begin by covering the critical elements of the discrimination of women in sport. I then introduce typical reactions to requests for more women and provide responses. I conclude with key steps to becoming a successful advocate for women in sport.

### **Rationale for Increasing the Presence of Women in the Canadian Sport System**

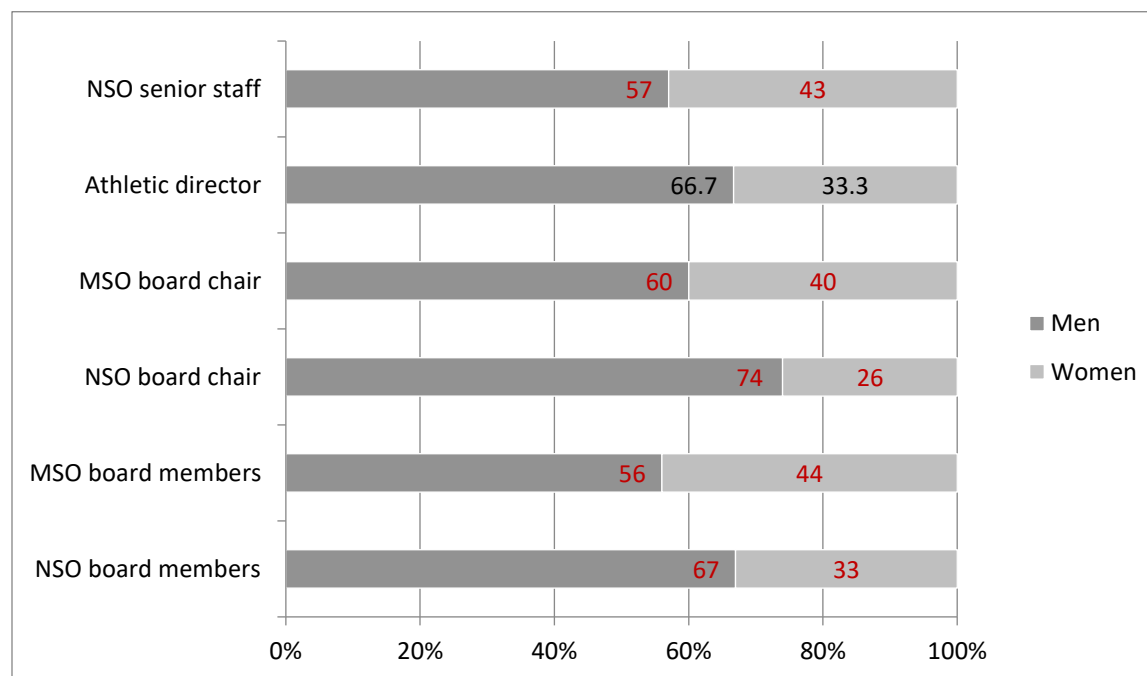
#### ***Our sport system should be representative of our sport communities.***

Canada's current sport system cannot claim to be truly representative of our population. Women are significantly less present than their male colleagues and this situation repeats itself year after year. The most recent statistics, compiled by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, are revealing. Whether as coaches, administrators, or officials, women remain the minority although it is worth pointing out that for senior leadership representation, movement is in a positive direction.

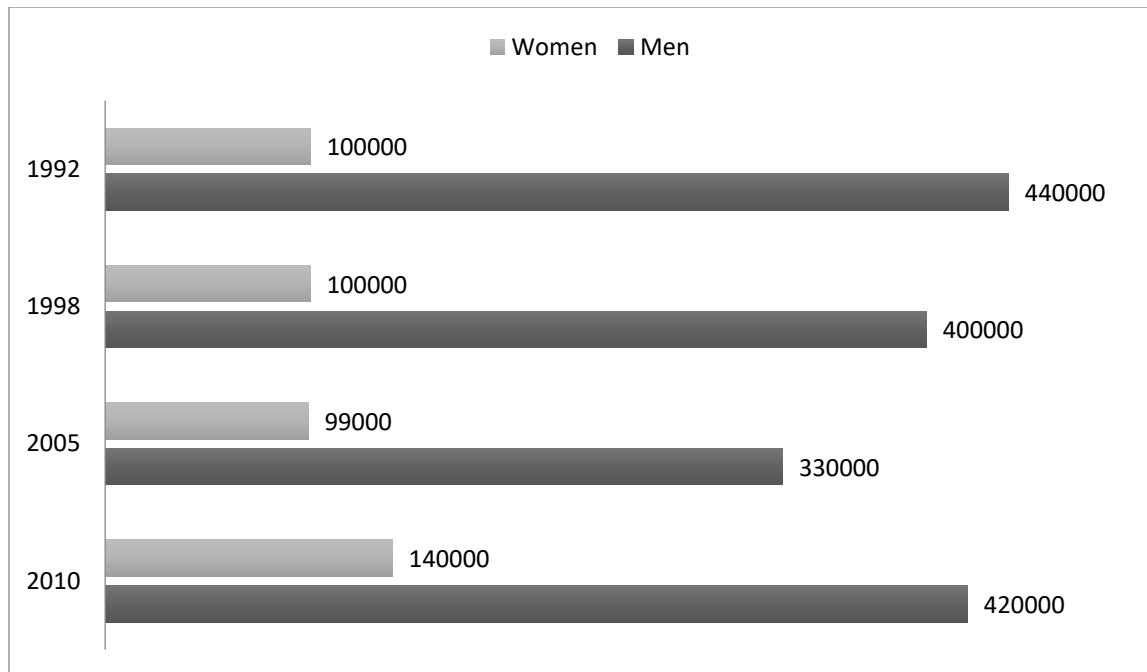
#### ***Percentage of Canadian women head coaches at the Olympic Games***

Olympic	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
<b>Women</b>	13	21	7	15	9	13	19	10	6
<b>Men</b>	87	79	93	85	91	87	81	90	94

#### ***Percentage breakdown of leaders of national sport organizations and multi-sport organizations by gender***



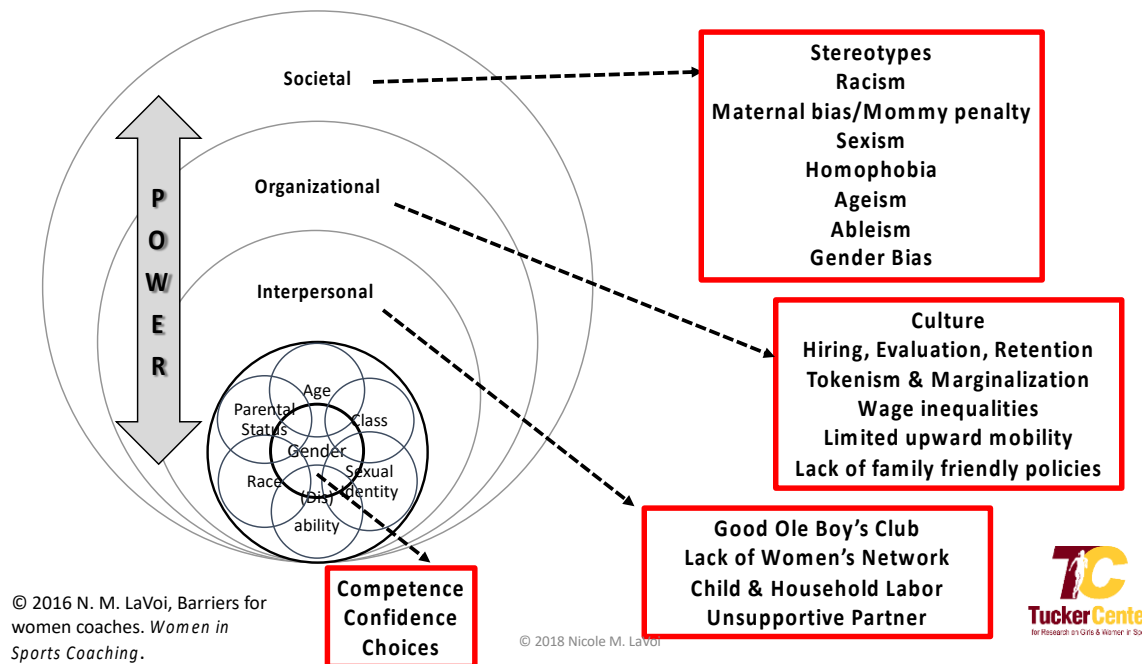
#### ***Men and women officials in Canada***



Keep in mind that these statistics do not necessarily reflect discrimination against women; rather they suggest systemic discrimination engendered by a multitude of factors. Quebec-based author, journalist, speaker, and moderator Pascale Navarro defines systemic discrimination as follows:

“Because of traditions and a history in which power has been exercised by men, the system in which we live has established itself in a particular way that gives them certain advantages (higher wages, greater decision-making power, and authority). Because of this system, women have been kept out of various aspects of social life. This does not mean that men want it or that women are happy with it. A system can change when we take steps to make it happen.”

In the sport world, systemic discrimination takes many forms. Writing in *Women in sports coaching*, Nicole LaVoi of the School of Kinesiology at the University of Minnesota, presents an ecological model of barriers and supports for women coaches which clearly illustrates how systemic discrimination takes place:



The obstacles within Canada's sport system that competent women face deprive the system of significant talent, which is reason enough to strive to remove these obstacles. Quotes from women in senior staff positions in Provincial Sport Organizations illustrate some of those barriers:

**Credibility:** "I see it; I know it. It took me about 20 years to gain respect from the older men in my organization."

**Competence:** "It happened to me last year, I was in charge of my first national championship, which is a big tournament. What is upsetting is that each time you show up somewhere, you have to prove something to someone because you are a woman. Everyone is supposed to be equal! So, you get there, you are competent, you have been chosen to do the job, you have the knowledge, you passed the interview, etc. But still you have the pressure to perform, to prove that you have what it takes to do a good job."

**Quota:** "We had a rather incredible meeting where we really felt that when it comes to women, we raise merit questions whereas when it comes to men, we do not really ask ourselves that. We heard incredible things that we did not expect to hear at that meeting. With the new equality rules in our sport, one regulation says that you have to have at least one woman in each region, and right away there were doubts of competence. Are women competent enough? Listen, I could not believe it. Men are never asked that question. It's incredible! We are in a country where our female sport works extremely well while we are still wondering if women are competent to be on those committees."

"For me, there is no doubt that there is a lot of work still to be done to change our sport culture and to change the narrative about women in leadership positions."

### ***Gender equality in sport in Canada is no longer optional.***

In recent years, government initiatives focusing on girls and women in sport include

- Women and Girls in Sport: Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (<https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/CHPC/report-7>)
- Federal-Provincial-Territorial Sport Committee (FPTSC) working group report on girls and women in sport and physical activity (2018). All federal and provincial ministers responsible for sport, physical activity, and recreation approved the FPTSC working group recommendations at their 2019 conference in Red Deer, Alta., a strong commitment to making sport more equitable in their respective jurisdictions. By 2024, for

example, National Sport Organizations (NSOs) and Multi-Sport Organizations are obliged to reach the target of 40/60 for membership on their boards of directors.

- Minister Kirsty Duncan's working group on girls and women in sport (2018)  
(<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/working-group-gender-equity.html>)

### **Diversity is Strength**

The Oxford Dictionary defines diversity as “the range of human differences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, social class, physical ability or attributes, religious or ethical values system, national origin, political beliefs or other ideologies.” Here the focus is on gender diversity, acknowledging that diversity exists within each gender.

Recently, a number of authors have demonstrated that diversity brings many benefits to a wide variety of organizations in many sectors, including such traditional male strongholds as business, medicine, politics, and the arts. Why should the sport world be different? Currently, the predominant face of sport leadership in Canada is that of a middle-aged (white) man. This is not to question their right to a presence. However, a flourishing, progressive sport culture is one which enables more women to hold key positions of positional power.

Diversity brings many benefits. Mixing people with diversified life backgrounds favours a multiplicity of solutions with each person providing their unique ways of thinking, operating, and problem-solving. Such diversity enables decisions that consider the varied needs of the members the organizations serve. Diversity brings different talents and skills to the table, allowing each member of the organization to learn and grow. In the end, everyone wins, and the organization becomes more productive.

In considering the important arguments for more diversity in leadership positions, let us remember that women are not a minority but constitute 50.4% of the Canadian population and are present in all minority groups. How can they not be represented on equal terms with male colleagues? The latest report of the World Economic Forum noted that “if the trend continues, it will be necessary to wait until the year 2234 so that the equality between men and women is reached in the world.” In reaction, *La Presse* columnist Rima Elkouri wrote:

"I'm kind of patient. But two centuries to achieve equality, I admit that I find it a bit long. That is why I am in favor of measures to support the parity accelerator. Too many headwinds tell us it will not happen by itself. "

Author's note: The word “parity” can be used interchangeably with “equality” and is more common in French.

My argument is mainly about the implementation of corrective measures such as quotas and targets so that equality between women and men is realized before 2234! Among the works consulted to develop this argument, a Navarro essay, *Femmes et pouvoir : les changements nécessaires*, proved particularly inspiring as she debunks the myths surrounding the implementation of such measures (<http://www.lemeac.com/catalogue/1531-femmes-et-pouvoir-les-changements-necessaires.html>).

I have adapted the myths into sport-context scenarios, presenting typical reactions when we ask for more women. Each is followed by an appropriate response.

### **SCENARIO 1**

Your club has a new coaching position for the U15 girls' team. You suggest that the selection committee hire a woman so the girls will have a role model with whom they can identify and share similar experiences.

### **REACTION 1**

The selection committee responds that reserving positions for women is discrimination against men.

### **RESPONSE 1**

According to Navarro, "We do not impose gender quotas without reason. It is done to achieve parity in the name of the principle of equality." I suggest that we are far from reaching equality in our sport system, with men largely favoured and women facing discrimination.

Rather than being seen as discrimination against men, quotas are a means of countering historic systemic discrimination and the years of women's exclusion from decision making, temporarily favouring a historically discriminated group, and ensuring equal opportunities between the sexes.

One question that is automatically raised when discussing setting quotas or reserving certain positions for women is the following: "Is doing so legally considered discrimination? "

The Charters of Rights and Freedoms of Quebec and Canada provide an answer by applying two important criteria: Does this measure (quota) apply to an under-represented group (in our case, women in leadership positions in sport)? Is this measure put in place by a non-profit organization?

Thus, measures that favour an under-represented group are justified because such measures are necessary if one wishes one day to achieve equality between women and men. Such measures are often called 'affirmative action'. Moreover, the Charters are explicit in not prohibiting the establishment of "laws, programs or activities intended to improve the situation of disadvantaged individuals or groups."

### ***SCENARIO 2***

At your last board meeting, you heard that by 2024, all NSOs will have to reach the target of 40/60 for members representation on the board of directors.

### ***REACTION 2***

A male board member expressed his concerns about finding competent women. He strongly believes that quotas undermine quality and competence when hiring. A woman member expressed her fear of women filling the position because they are women and not because they are competent. She said: "I hope I was chosen because I am competent, not because I am a woman."

### ***RESPONSE 2***

Imposing gender quotas to speed up the achievement of equality, regardless of the domain, has always displeased many people, including women.

*L'actualité* reporter Noemie Mercier, speaking of the political class, explains this reluctance: "Quotas would be an affront to the principles of meritocracy ... Under a regime like this, second-rate candidates could take the place of men more qualified and the whole political class would be weakened. Elected officials must be chosen for their competence and not according to their gender."

Navarro has written that "the argument most commonly used to oppose parity is to assume the incompetence of women, and the fear that they do not deserve their place. Have we ever wondered about that of men? If we believe this logic, women by default are incompetent, and men, by default, competent."

While the prospect of quotas repels many, voluntary measures may fail to produce results and inaction is unlikely to end conservative practices. Quota policies have been put in place in several organizations, at different levels, in different countries with no finding of a loss of competence or quality of work. In fact, due to legislation setting quotas, France and Norway are the only countries where 40% or more women are found on the boards of directors of publicly traded companies.

A study by Tim Besley, professor of economics at the London School of Economics, was illuminating:

"Our main finding is that gender quotas increase the competence of the political class in general, and among men in particular. Moreover, quotas are indeed bad news for mediocre male leaders who tend to be forced out. [...] Because new leaders – on average – are more competent, they feel less threatened by selecting more able candidates, which starts a virtuous circle of higher competence."

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2017/03/13/gender-quotas-and-the-crisis-of-the-mediocre-man/>

It would appear that quotas elevate the quality of people in leadership positions as competence attracts more competence. In this sense, reserving places for women leads to greater competition between men, since they remain as numerous with fewer positions available, which raises the level of their competence. Conversely, quotas allow qualified women to be selected. It is not a question of hiring an incompetent woman in the place of a competent man, but rather of encouraging the hiring of a competent woman who has been unjustly erased from the process. In short, these are not policies that give women more rights, but are a way of reducing the privileges of some and giving women the same opportunities as men.

### ***SCENARIO 3***

At your organization's annual retreat, you suggest that your organization should have more women on staff along with parity of representation. You feel that this would help the organization to better meet the needs of girls and women in your sport.

### ***REACTION 3***

The majority of the staff feel that this is not necessary because men can represent women very well.

### ***RESPONSE 3***

As Navarro says: "... women too can very well represent men ... The question is not there ... We cannot ask a single woman to represent all women. For parity to work and for the population to be represented as best as possible, people of all walks of life need to be present".

Equality is a way of broadening the profiles of people in power to better represent society. It also allows for a greater diversity of skills, expertise, and life experience that will be an asset to any organization. For the Coaching Association of Canada, "Women are an untapped resource in the entire sport community. Although female athletes make up 50 per cent and sometimes more of national team members, the percentage of women coaches at this level is much lower. Women have life experiences and leadership, as well as different values and attitudes that provide them with interesting sport expertise and perspective. "

Putting in place mechanisms to promote the presence of women in sports organizations is a concrete way to act for real change and to ensure their voices are represented and heard. Parallels may be drawn from the corporate community as noted by Catalyst, which reported that "Boards that are at least 30% women offer a positive environment for innovative ideas to spring from gender diversity (<https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-on-corporate-boards/>).

### ***SCENARIO 4***

Recently, your organization advertised a senior leadership position. CVs were submitted by two women and 23 men. You expressed surprise that so few women had applied for the position.

### ***REACTION 4***

The selection committee responded that, to the contrary, they were not surprised because women are not interested in leadership positions.

### ***RESPONSE 4***

In the 2011 Sundance documentary, *Miss Representation*, Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defence Fund, said: "You can't be what you can't see." (<http://therepresentationproject.org/film/miss-representation-film/0>).

That phrase has been repeated so often that its truth is threatened by overuse. But the truth is that the absence of role models is a key barrier to women in virtually every career path, including sport. Rather than dis-interest, I suggest that the real reason many women fail to apply for leadership positions is the absence of women whom they can emulate, and that absence can be rectified through quotas.

When such measures are put in place, organizations do find women to fill the positions. This fact deconstructs the myth that if women are few, it is because they are not interested in these positions. On the contrary, when given a



place, women answer the call. Caroline Codsi, the head of Women in Governance, points to Quebec's Act Respecting the Governance of State-Owned Enterprises: "This law provides for gender parity. In a short period of time, we have increased from 18-20% of women to 50% (<http://legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/ShowDoc/cs/G-1.02>). So it works. It only proves one thing: When we legislate, we find women. When we do not legislate, we find excuses."

The reality is not that women are not interested, but that their environments must change to become more inclusive. For women coaches, many inequities persist, negatively affecting their experience and their desire to be involved in sport. Some studies show that women often leave their jobs as coaches due mainly to systematic sexism in sports organizations, perpetual gender discrimination, gender stereotypes that influence organizational culture, and gender bias in the hiring process. Moreover, women coaches are more likely than men to experience negative experiences caused by barriers, inequalities, and difficulties that persist in the sporting environment, including accessing support staff, a lack of administrative support, discrimination, unequal wages compared to men, harassment, homophobia, stress, and performance pressure to prove themselves.

A significant change in the environment of coaches and the sport community in general is essential in order to increase the retention rate and to attract new coaches. Solutions include mentoring to support coaches, additional training on female coaching, the progressive support of the administration, and the implementation of policies on harassment, abuse, and equity.

### **How To Be a Successful Advocate for Women in Sport** (and cure the "speechless syndrome")

Remember that women are not a minority group: we make up 50.4% of the Canadian population.

Remember that most people want to do good; they might not know how.

Know the statistics for your country/province/organization on the number of women holding leadership positions.

Educate colleagues on the facts about women in leadership positions, including statistics, women's experiences, and success stories.

Practice your arguments and test them with people you know are tough to convince.

Connect with people who are facing the same issue so you can learn from each other.

Use the magic word "ASK". Never be afraid of asking because the worst thing that can happen is that you will get a NO. As Marion Lay, one of Canada's outstanding advocates for equality in sport, says:

"You go in and get a "no." Celebrate that you got a "no" because you got in and had a chance to hear what they had to say and why they said "no." And you had a chance to say things that are important to you. I honestly believe that "no" is just one word away from "yes".

### **Conclusion**

Gender equity in sport is gaining acceptance and is, in fact, unavoidable. Currently, university and college athletic boards in Canada have mandatory equity policies. In 2012, the National Sport Institute of Quebec adopted a base of 40% minimum of women or men on its board. Nationally all boards of directors of funded NSOs will have to reach 40 percent to 60 percent of women by December 2024. Such initiatives serve as encouraging precedents and demonstrate that equity policies are not only possible, but they work.

### **About the Author**

Guylaine Demers, a professor at Laval University, is the women's studies research chair. The chair of Égale Action, she takes particular interest in issues of women in sport and LGBT-phobia in sport. Guylaine made the CAAWS list of Most Influential Women in 2007, 2010, and 2015. She was the chair of the Women and Sport Working Group set up in 2018 by Kirsty Duncan, Minister of Science and Sport. One of her achievements was the organization of Conversation 2015 dedicated to fostering solutions to bettering the experiences of women in the Canadian sport system ([www.SolutionsWomenSport.ca](http://www.SolutionsWomenSport.ca)). She is organizing another Conversation in June 2020 ([www.conversation2020.ca](http://www.conversation2020.ca)).



**References Available Upon Request**

**P.S.**

**The CAC recommends: 50 Ways to Fight Bias: An activity that helps you combat gender bias at work**

About the program

Gender bias is holding women back in the workplace. Whether deliberate or unconscious, bias makes it harder for women to get hired and promoted and negatively impacts their day-to-day work experiences. This hurts women and makes it difficult for companies to level the playing field.

Pairing a card-based activity with a short video series, 50 Ways to Fight Bias gives people the tools to address gender bias head-on.